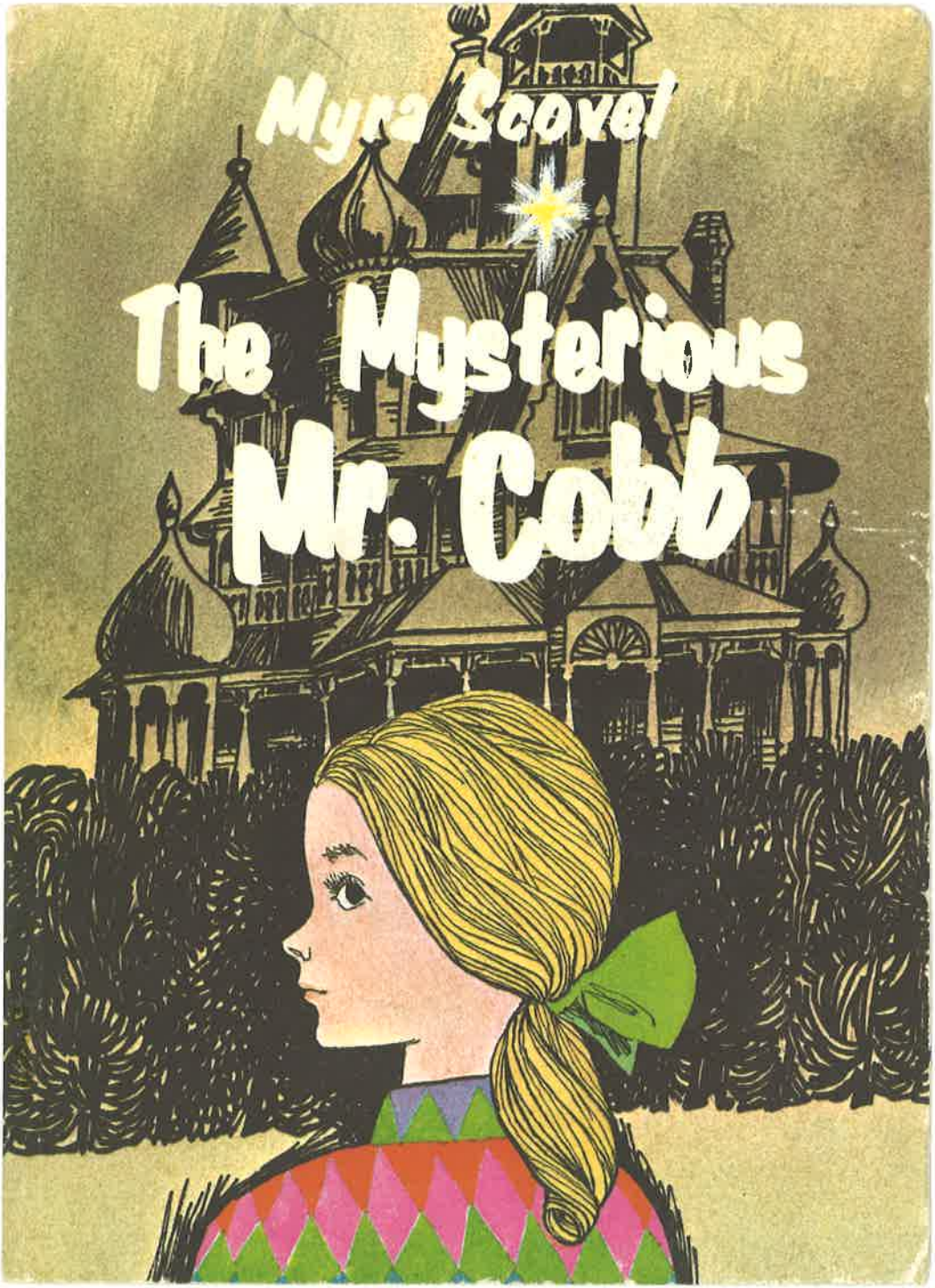

Myra Scovel
The Mysterious
Mr. Cobb

Michael Harris
830-1189

AN ORIGINAL PAPERBACK

The Mysterious Mr. Cobb

by Myra Scovel

It's all over at last—the confusion and commotion of moving! In her parents' new home, located in the wealthiest section of town, Alice is thrilled to have the room she likes best . . . a real princess room. Peeking out of a window, Alice sees the garden, an orchard, and beyond that, the house next door that looks just like a castle and spooky too!

All the ingredients for a good mystery are contained in this novel designed to appeal to juniors. There are mysterious dancing lights in the princess room—a gardener who isn't a gardener and a bear that is not a bear. There is also a rich old meanie living next door with a big high fence around his house. Why does Alice decide she has to meet this man? How does she get through the fence?

Alice meets a boy named Andy and as allies they begin to solve these challenges. An underlying challenge exists for all concerned—the rediscovery of spiritual values in a materialistic society.

(continued on inside back cover)

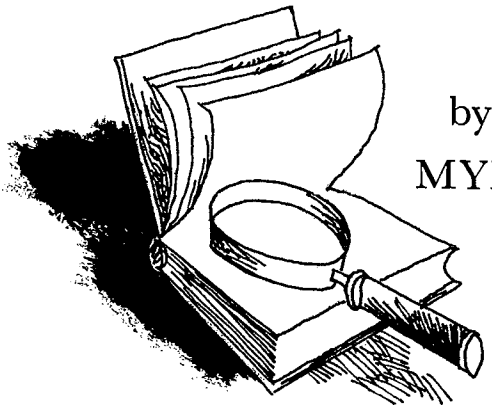
ILLUSTRATIONS BY ALLEN EITZEN

For Michael,
with love.

The Mysterious Mr. Cobb

Myra Scovel

The Mysterious Mr. Cobb



by
MYRA SCOVEL

Illustrated by
ALLAN EITZEN

FRIENDSHIP PRESS NEW YORK

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOG CARD NUMBER: 67-11858

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To the memory of
my first Sunday School teacher
ELSIE ARCHIBALD
who was
the Miss Archer
of this story

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1

Those Mysterious Lights

"Wow! If I weren't eleven years old and didn't believe in that stuff anymore, I'd think I was living in a fairy tale," Alice said to herself.

All she could see of the house next door looked exactly like a castle. She had stepped up on the window seat beside the fireplace to see what the view from the little high window might be. She was hoping that this would be her bedroom.

Alice liked this room the best of any in the new house. The windows at the back overlooked the garden; there was an apple orchard beyond.

Miss Trent, the real estate lady who was trying to sell

them the house here in Brentwood, had said that an old man lived next door.

The place looked spooky. Anything might be hidden behind that high hedge—dragons, maybe, or even an old ogre.

Just then a bright light struck her eyes. A small circle of sunshine danced over her face, then around the walls of the room.

"Now who is that smart aleck who is shining a mirror in my eyes?" she wondered, as she ducked below the window. "Well, Mr. Ogre, you can't fool me. The boys in school do that little trick all the time."

But what in the world was that old man doing on the top floor of his castle, flashing a mirror into her eyes? Every time she raised her head above the level of the window, the light would shine in her eyes again.

But at last it seemed that he was tired of playing and the light disappeared altogether.

"Stop bothering me, Mr. Ogre," Alice addressed the house next door. "We've looked at about two dozen houses, and this is the one I like best. And this is my favorite room. I feel like a princess here and this is just the room for a princess. So please keep out of it, Mr. Ogre. Please?"

Alice left her lookout and danced over to the floor-length mirror on the closet door where she drew herself up like a haughty princess. She did not look like a prin-

cess, unless there are princesses who are short and plump —and definitely *not* tall and slim—and who have long blonde hair tied in a pony tail.

She left the mirror and went back to the three large windows overlooking the untended garden at the back of the house.

But it was hard to keep away from the window seat and the small window above it. She would try it one more time before going downstairs to see what Mom and Pops had decided. "Oh, I do hope it will be this house," she said to herself.

There had been something wrong with every house they had looked at. Either the rooms were too small, or they were too large and hard to heat; or Mom didn't like the kitchen, or there was no place for Pops's workshop. "Please, God, don't let them find anything wrong with this one," she begged.

When she stood on the window seat again, the light did not appear. Could she have imagined it? She jumped to the floor with a thud. She had to find out at once what was happening downstairs.

"Hey, what's going on up there?" Pops called from the lower hall. "It's a good thing these floors are well built. If this had been some of the houses we've seen, you'd have come right on through the ceiling."

Pops was always teasing her about being chubby. She used to be when she was little, but . . . well, she wasn't all

that chubby now. Pops still called her "Bounce," though. When she asked him why, he said, "Because you do bounce, Bounce, and that's all there is to it."

Back in the living room, Pops said to Alice, "Look at that wood paneling, Bounce. Isn't it beautiful?"

Pops liked anything made of wood. So far, so good, thought Alice. Pops did not wait for her answer. He had turned to Miss Trent, who was showing them the house. "Who did you say lived next door?" he asked her.

"None other than E. A. Cobb himself," said Miss Trent. "I told you that this was the wealthiest section of Brentwood."

"Not Eben A. Cobb, of Cobb, McKinney and Cobb!" exclaimed Pops.

"He's the very one," said Miss Trent, looking very pleased with herself.

"Helen, this probably means we should take it," Pops said to Mom, holding her by both arms and looking straight into her blue eyes. "Cobb is the man I've been trying to meet for a long time. That office building of his downtown is as old as the hills. Mr. Weatherby thinks our firm should get the contract to build him a new one, but Cobb won't talk to any of us about it. Now, if I lived next door—well, Cobb might talk to me just as a neighbor."

"If this is where you really want to be, Ed, then we'd better take this house," said Mom quietly.

Alice liked to look at her parents when they were happy. They looked so "right" together—Pops so dark and handsome, and Mom so blonde and beautiful. Once she heard Mr. Hollingsworth, their minister, call them an ideal couple.

But suddenly they both looked *un*happy. "Helen, we both know that we can't afford this house," Pops said with a sigh, looking over at the Cobb castle which was framed by a living room window. They did not say a word for a long time. Then Mom almost whispered, "Perhaps we can't afford *not* to buy it, Ed."

"I'll leave you here to think it over," said Miss Trent. "You can think better alone, and besides, I have to meet another customer at two o'clock. You can drop the key off at the real estate office on your way home. If you do decide to take the house, let me know. Another family has first chance at it, but I think we can arrange to give you the house instead."

"That's funny," said Pops, after Miss Trent had left. "If another fellow has first chance at it, how can she arrange to give us the house unless he refuses it?" He sat down on the window seat, took out his pad and jotted down some figures.

"Helen, what did you mean by saying perhaps we can't afford *not* to buy this house?" he asked.

"You practically said the same thing yourself a few minutes ago," she replied.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

Mom sat down beside him. "Your job with the Weatherby Company is to sell people the idea of building new offices. Your boss has asked you to move into this kind of neighborhood so that you can meet the rich people who want offices built for them. Right?"

"Right," said Pops.

"And Mr. Cobb next door is the top man on your list, but he won't see you. He can't help seeing a neighbor, can he?" asked Mom.

"Well, I don't know," said Pops, "but living this close would certainly help. And we've got to live somewhere. As I said, being shown an empty house next door to the man you want to meet most—well, it almost seems like a sign that we should take it. If I could get Eben A. Cobb to let Weatherby build him an office, Weatherby would be the happiest man in the world. I bet he'd give me a raise and maybe a bonus besides. Helen, you may have a rich husband yet!"

"Are you *sure* you want to be rich, Ed?" Mom was looking straight into his eyes, as if this were the most important question ever asked.

"Who doesn't want to be rich?" he replied without giving Mom's question any thought. He did not seem to notice that Mom looked disappointed.

It was all very confusing to Alice. She didn't see why they were moving from their comfortable little home in

White Birch Corners in the first place. They liked it there, and there certainly wasn't anything wrong with the house. Pops was always putting his arm around Mom's shoulder and telling visitors that he had built the house himself as a wedding present for his bride.

Then, one day, for no special reason Alice could think of, there was all this talk about moving to a larger house. And now, instead of being happy about it, Pops seemed worried most of the time, and talked about nothing but money. Alice couldn't tell whether Mom really wanted to move or not. She certainly made Pops think she wanted to, but Alice wasn't so sure.

Pops was muttering to himself as he added up the column of figures he had jotted down. "If we should decide to take this house, I might be able to swing it by borrowing more money from the bank."

"If you have to borrow money, you have to," said Mom, as if all interest in buying a house had suddenly left her.

"Helen, that isn't like you," said Pops. "You've always had a horror of borrowing money."

"I know it," said Mom. "It's just that I want you to do what you think is best. Being a success at this job means so much to you. I don't want to stand in your way. Of course I hate to borrow money, but if that's what it takes for you to make good with Mr. Weatherby, then we had better borrow more money."

She had picked up her yardstick and was measuring the windows for curtains. That would take a long time.

"I might as well go back upstairs and look at the other bedrooms," Alice said to herself. "I'll never get the princess one. Mom and Pops will need that one because it's larger than the front one, and there are two of them and only one of me."

There was an even smaller bedroom, but Alice was not interested in that one. She went straight to the front bedroom, which had a view of the street, and there was another surprise. A well-dressed Negro gentleman and his wife were getting out of a car and coming up the front walk. Beside them was their daughter, a girl about Alice's age. Alice ran downstairs quickly as the doorbell rang.

"There's someone at the door," Mom was saying. Pops hurried to see who it was. Alice stood in the lower hall, watching.

"I beg your pardon. I'm Dr. Appleby," said the man. He had a strong, happy voice that Alice liked. "This is my wife, Mrs. Appleby, and this is our daughter, Ginny. We saw the car and thought Miss Trent might be here."

"She has just left," said Pops. "Come in, won't you? I'm Edward Hunter and this is my wife." The men shook hands.

"Yes, do," said Mom. "Ginny, you must be about our daughter's age. How old are you?"

"I'm eleven," said Ginny.

"Alice is eleven, too," said Mom.

"I'd better get in there before Mom calls me," said Alice to herself. The girls were introduced, and for a moment they stood looking at each other, wondering what to say.

"We've had our eye on this house for some time," said Dr. Appleby. "I was brought up in the old Negro section of Smithtown, the next town north. I have an office in my father's house there. But my work in the Brentwood Hospital has increased, and I'm looking for a place nearer."

"Are you the man who has an option on this house?" asked Pops.

"Yes, we have the first chance to buy it. I fell in love with the place as soon as I saw the wood paneling."

"Me too," said Pops. "I do a little woodwork myself when I have time."

"You do? Well, we have the same hobby," said Dr. Appleby, smiling. The two men moved over to rub the wood with the flat of their hands, and talk about their hobbies.

"Do you like the house, too?" Mom asked Mrs. Appleby.

"I really don't want to move to this suburb at all," she replied quietly. "All my life I've had a dream house in my mind. I know just where I want each room."

"We'll be moving out of my dream house if we take this place," said Mom. "Tell me about yours."

"Well, in the first place, I want it to be in the country, maybe at the edge of a village, looking out over the fields to the hills in the distance," said Mrs. Appleby.

"Why, that's just the kind of place we chose for our dream house!" said Mom. "You've described our house in White Birch Corners exactly." The two ladies went over and sat down on the window seat looking out on the street.

"Then why on earth are you moving?" asked Mrs. Appleby.

Mom turned quickly to the girls and said, "It's a lovely day. Don't you two want to run outdoors and see the garden?"

Alice and Ginny went out through the dining room and kitchen without saying a word to each other. They were both thinking of what their mothers had said. "I wish I knew what Mom was saying about why we are having to move," thought Alice.

"I wonder if Daddy knows about Mother's dream house," thought Ginny.

They walked out through the garden until they came to the first row of apple trees. The trunk of one of the trees was bent over so it lay across the low stone wall which divided the garden from the orchard. Ginny sat on the tree trunk and spread out her full pink skirt. Alice had on slacks so she straddled the wall.

Ginny looked up at the windows of the back bedroom.

"That's going to be my room, if we get this house," she said.

"Oh," said Alice. She hadn't realized how very much she wanted this house until Ginny spoke of the princess bedroom as her own.

"Have you ever seen the old man who lives in the house next door?" asked Alice, to change the subject.

"No, I never have," said Ginny, looking over in that direction. "You know, there's something strange about that room up there." Evidently Ginny was not going to let the subject be changed.

"What's strange about it?" asked Alice.

"Well, there's a funny little ball of light that danced around that room the two times we were here before," said Ginny.

Alice decided not to tell Ginny that she knew about the old man and his mirror. Ginny seemed to think some magic was at work.

"Where do you go to school?" asked Alice. This time she succeeded in changing the subject. The two girls talked as if they had always known each other. They were deep in a discussion about their teachers in general, and their church school teachers in particular, when they heard Ginny's mother's voice from the back porch.

"It's time to go, Ginny," called Mrs. Appleby.

Ginny looked up at the bedroom windows and sighed a deep sigh. "Good-bye, house. Good-bye, my bedroom.

Good-bye forever," she whispered. She slid off the tree trunk and straightened her skirt.

"Why did you say that?" asked Alice, as they walked slowly through the garden.

"I don't know," Ginny replied. "I've got a feeling deep down inside me that nothing this wonderful could happen to our family. Well, we ought to be used to it by now." She sighed.

Alice felt a little strange inside—knowing they wanted the very same things. Alice wished she could say something to cheer her.

"I'll tell you what," said Alice. "Let's make a promise. If you get this house, you invite me to come to see you, and if we get the house, I'll invite you to come to see me." She paused. "It wouldn't really be like living in the house though, would it?"

"No," said Ginny. "But it's an idea." She said it in a flat, empty voice as though she didn't really believe it would happen.

"Anyway, if we do get the house, I'll invite you here a lot," said Alice.

Mom and Pops and Alice walked out to the car to say good-bye to the Applebys. "Well, good luck and happiness to whichever family gets the house," said Dr. Appleby, as he shook hands with Pops.

"What will you do if you don't get it?" asked Pops. "I know you like the place as much as we do."

"Oh, take a long walk in the woods till I get over my disappointment, I guess," said Dr. Appleby.

"Do you do that, too, when you're in trouble?" asked Pops. "That is exactly what *I* do—another thing we have in common beside our woodworking."

"I do hope our paths will cross again," Mom said to Mrs. Appleby.

Ginny said good-bye, but she did not smile, not even when she waved to Alice from the back window as the car drove away.

2

The New Wire Fence

That evening in the house that looked like a castle, twelve-year-old Eben Andrews Cobb III crossed the floor of what used to be his grandmother's sitting room and turned off the television. He wasn't looking at it anyway, and he had to do some thinking before his grandfather came down for dinner. He settled himself in Grandmother's big chair by the African violets.

There had been two families looking at the house next door that day, and when Grandfather came home from his office and Andy tried to tell him about it, Grandfather blustered all over the place and muttered things about "these young men who think they can buy expensive

houses when they haven't got the money to pay for them . . . the town is full of them and they all owe money." Then he walked back and forth a time or two, hitting his fist into his other hand, and finally burst out, "Andy, I don't want to have anything to do with anyone who lives in that house next door. Do you hear?"

"I'll bet Grandfather wouldn't act this way if Grandmother were alive," Andy thought. He could almost hear her saying, "Now, now Eben, calm down, dear. Remember your high blood pressure."

Grandfather looked as if he had high blood pressure whenever Andy mentioned the house next door. His face got as red as the velvet draperies at the door of the little sitting room. Andy couldn't understand why. For the last two weeks, ever since he had arrived from Arizona to spend the summer with Grandfather, he had been trying to get into that house on the other side of the fence. It had been Andy's home for all the years of his life before his father got sick and they had to move to Arizona where the air was dry. They had been away for three years, and Andy hadn't seen the house since they had moved away.

"It just isn't like Grandfather," Andy thought. "He's usually kind of—well, understanding. He seems to know what you're thinking even when you don't say anything."

But every time Andy asked for the key so that he could

go through the rooms and see if the house was as he remembered it, Grandfather grumbled something about the house not really belonging to him anymore.

"Somebody is sure to move in soon," Grandfather would say crossly. "That real estate woman, Miss Trent, will sell it to some young go-getter businessman who thinks he is heaven's gift to the business world."

At last Andy was beginning to see what his mother and father had meant when he overheard them talking that day during spring vacation, back in Arizona.

"I think Grandfather Cobb needs someone to live with him," Andy's mother had said to his father.

"Why? What's the matter with Dad?" asked Father.

"Oh, I don't know," said Mother. "He's acting very strange about that house next door."

"What do you mean, he's acting strange?" asked Father.

"Well, he's built that high steel fence all around his place, and our house next door has not even been sold," said Mother. "So he really doesn't know who will be living there. How can he know he won't like them?"

"He has had some bad luck with the young men he counted on most to take my place in the office," said Father. "He doesn't want a man he can't trust and respect to take my place in the office. And the same thing is true of the house we lived in, where he and Grandmother found so much happiness."

"But that's not like your father," said Mother. "He

has always enjoyed young people. Remember what a good time he used to have with our friends when they came in?"

"I admit it isn't like him," said Father. "But it is hard to know what to do. After all, we did our best to get him to come here to stay with us. Have you any suggestions? He is independent, you know, and he wouldn't want a stranger to live with him."

"Why not send Andy there for his summer vacation?" said Mother, as if she had thought of it for the first time.

"He'd be lonely," said Father.

"And we'll be lonely without him," said Mother. "But I am worried about Grandfather Cobb."

Andy pretended to be surprised when his parents asked him whether he'd like to spend the summer with his grandfather in Brentwood. Of course he'd like to stay at the ranch and ride his horse, Star, but it looked as if Grandfather needed him. And he loved Grandfather's house. You could roam all over it from cellar to attic. His grandparents had always let him open all the trunks and the secret drawers in the old desk which had been his great-grandfather's.

Mother had almost cried when he left. At the airport she had said, "Andy, you will write to us, won't you? And if Grandfather seems . . . well, not like himself. . . . I mean. . . ." Mother hadn't been able to finish what she'd been trying so hard to say.

"Now, now, there's not a thing wrong with your grandfather," said Father. "Just go ahead and have a good time." He put his arm around Andy's shoulder so tightly that Andy could still feel it when he thought about it. "If you get bored and want to come home, write to us," Father had added.

Now, Andy had decided to write that letter—and maybe this very afternoon. So he had gone up to the third floor to see whether he could find some paper in Great-Grandfather's desk. He had been here only two weeks, and already he was down in the dumps thinking of home and the long months ahead. His school had closed for the summer vacation on the eighteenth of May and it wouldn't start again until September twenty-fifth.

"It's a good thing I found the new little secret drawer with all that junk in it and forgot about the letter," Andy said to himself. "Up to now, Grandfather has seemed just like his old self in every way, except for one thing—the house we used to live in. The way he is acting about it today makes me feel that Mother was right. He does need someone to be with him."

The door of his grandfather's study on the third floor banged shut, and Andy could hear the brisk, firm footsteps of Eben A. Cobb, Sr., hurrying down the stairs.

"Sorry I'm late, Andy," said Mr. Cobb. "You must be hungry."

"I could chew the antenna off this television set and

eat it for spaghetti, Grandfather. I thought you'd never come," said Andy.

"That's the trouble with being a lawyer. Something difficult is always so fascinating you don't want to leave it," said Mr. Cobb.

Andy had passed the study door that afternoon. He had gone quietly so as not to disturb Grandfather. On the desk were the heavy books with fine print just like Father's. Father was a lawyer, too—Eben A. Cobb, Jr., part of the firm of Eben A. Cobb and Son, Attorneys at Law. That was what the signs said on both their office doors.

"I miss your father, Andy," said Mr. Cobb. "I came across such a good solution to our case this afternoon. I wanted to share it with him."

Was that what Grandfather was chuckling about when Andy had passed the study that afternoon? He had been sitting in the chair by the window, looking over at the house next door, an open book in his lap, and a large magnifying glass in his hand. Andy had been surprised to see him smiling while looking in the direction of the house which had troubled him so much an hour or so earlier.

By this time Andy and his grandfather were in the long dining room eating the delicious meal which Mrs. Meggs, the housekeeper, had prepared. She had made stuffed pork chops, Andy's favorite.

"It surely is good to have you here, Andy," said Grandfather. "Do you know, it won't be any time at all before we'll have to decide which office you will be in—with me, here, or with your father in Arizona."

It didn't seem very soon to Andy. He would be the fourth Eben A. Cobb to be a lawyer. But he had to graduate from high school, then college, then law school before that could happen. Andy's great-grandfather had been a country lawyer long ago. It was his old desk that was up in the attic.

"You are very quiet, Andy," said Grandfather. "Here, have another piece of Mrs. Meggs's chocolate cake. I'll have a second cup of coffee with mine." He rang Grandmother's little silver bell and Mrs. Meggs came in with the coffee pot.

"She's a magician, that's what she is," said Grandfather. "She knows what I want without my asking for it, and she waves her wand and produces magic chocolate cake." This was another of Grandfather's jokes.

Nobody, by the furthest stretch of the imagination, could picture stolid little Mrs. Meggs with a magic wand in her hand. She had a perpetual crease in her forehead from worrying . . . about whether or not the man had put oil in the furnace, whether or not her cake would fall, whether or not she'd pushed the wrong button on her new electric stove. Most of all, she worried about Grandfather.

"Mr. Cobb, you know you shouldn't be having two cups of coffee at night," she said to him now. "You know what the doctor told Mrs. Cobb about having two cups of coffee at night."

"Now, now, Mrs. Meggs, you know what the doctor says will happen to people who worry," said Grandfather. "People who worry get ulcers. One more little cup of coffee isn't going to hurt me."

Mrs. Meggs "tsk-tsk-tsked" herself all the way to the kitchen.

Certainly there was nothing different about the evening meal. Grandfather had enjoyed every minute of it. So had Andy for that matter. But the dark look came back to Grandfather's face as they rose from the table.

"Andy," he said, "let's take a walk down along the fence I've put up between the two houses. I want to make sure that every inch of it is solid enough to keep out neighbors. Neighbors? Huh!" He grunted his disgust.

3

The Princess Bedroom

After pages of adding and subtracting and hours of talks with Mom, Pops finally decided to buy the house. Alice could hardly wait to move in.

But slipping in and out of her mind was a feeling that something about moving from White Birch Corners was not quite right. She had a sort of guilty feeling whenever she thought of Ginny. Alice remembered how sad Ginny had been when she looked up at the house and said, "Good-bye, house. Good-bye, my bedroom. Good-bye forever."

"Why hadn't the Applebys been the ones to get the house, when they had had first choice?" Alice had asked

Pops, and he said something about "business you wouldn't understand." Well, she would keep her promise to have Ginny over often.

The Hunters decided to wait until school was out in June before moving so that Alice could finish her school year. As soon as Pops said it was all right for her to tell her friends, she asked Terry and Marilyn and Sue to stop in on the way home from school for cokes and cookies. It was fun to see the surprised look on their faces when she told them about the house and about the new car they were going to get before moving to Brentwood.

But when Terry asked, "What is your bedroom like?" Alice replied, "Oh, it's just a bedroom." She could not bring herself to mention the princess bedroom and the dancing lights from somebody's small mirror next door. For one reason, she would probably be in the front bedroom anyway, and for another, she did not want the girls to tell the others in their class about the mysterious house next door. Terry couldn't keep a secret from Marilyn and Sue, and Marilyn and Sue couldn't keep a secret from anybody.

It was only a few weeks later that Miss Archer's church school class, to which the girls belonged, planned a farewell surprise party for Alice. And, of course, Marilyn and Sue had to tell her. Alice could not help being disappointed that she knew.

"I'll bet Miss Archer will give you a present wrapped

up in a sheet of new Bible verses to learn," said Marilyn one afternoon in the Hunter kitchen. Everyone laughed. Mrs. Hunter, coming in with clean clothes from the line, said, "Is Miss Archer still teaching you girls Bible verses, as she did us?"

"Did Miss Archer teach *you,* Mrs. Hunter?" asked Marilyn.

"Yes, she did," Mom replied. "I'm ashamed to say it, but the *only* Bible verses I remember today are the ones Miss Archer taught me."

"Boy, she must be a hundred years old," said Sue. "At least she looks it."

"What did she look like when she was young?" asked Terry.

"Exactly as she looks now," said Mom. "Her hair isn't any grayer than it was, though I don't know why, with all the trouble she has had. Miss Archer has the same strong, stolid figure and the same twinkle in her blue eyes as she had when I was your age. She always seemed to know when things went wrong, or when you were facing something difficult. She'd put her arm around your shoulder and hold you just a minute. For some reason things always seemed better afterward."

"What Mom said about Miss Archer is still true," thought Alice, as she got into the bus after the farewell party. Miss Archer *had* given her a present and it was *not* wrapped in paper with Bible verses written on it,

but in delicate blue paper covered with pink roses. Alice could feel that it was a book.

When her friends had all left, she turned to thank Miss Archer and suddenly realized that nothing would ever be the same again. There would be no Terry or Marilyn or Sue or any of the others in their class. There would be no Miss Archer. It was then that Miss Archer had put her arm around Alice's shoulder and held her close, saying, "There will be new friends, Alice. A whole, new, wonderful adventure lies ahead. Things won't always be easy, but they won't *always* be hard, either. We'll miss you, but you'll have a lot of fun in your new home. Someday we'll all come to see you. I'll drive Terry and Marilyn and Sue over some Sunday afternoon."

"Mom was certainly right," Alice said to herself as she settled down in the seat behind the bus driver. "Things do seem better now. A whole new, wonderful adventure. . . ."

Eventually the day came when they were to leave the house at White Birch Corners. Alice had expected the movers to be noisy and crash-banging, and the whole thing quite exciting. Instead, it was all done very quietly. Mom and Pops were quietest of all. Pops didn't joke with the men as he usually did. He and Mom answered their questions with the fewest possible words—"Right over here"; "No, in that box, please"; "The chair in the upstairs hall."

The men wheeled and lifted the heavy furniture easily and quickly. The moving van was soon filled and everything covered with padded quilts. Pops sighed a deep sigh.

"I'll go over to the other house with the men and show them where to put things," said Mom. "You finish up here, and I'll come back and get you." She almost ran out of the house.

Alice went to the window to watch the huge truck pull out of the driveway. Mom got into the new white convertible with the red leather seats. As she took hold of the wheel, she looked up at the house; then Alice saw her mother brushing the tears from her eyes.

No, the moving hadn't turned out at all the way Alice had thought it would. She had a lost feeling, a not-here-and-not-there feeling, as if she were nowhere at all. The house at White Birch Corners did not look as if it had ever, ever been Alice's home. There were dirty streaks on the walls which hadn't shown when the furniture was there. There were faded places all around where the pictures had hung.

Alice went upstairs for a last look at her small bedroom. It looked big and cold, now that it was empty. She could walk into the little closet, which before had been so crowded that dresses and jeans slipped off the hangers, and boxes fell off the shelf when she opened the door.

The shelf was empty now. As she started downstairs,

she heard the air going out of the cushion as Pops sat in his old leather chair in the living room. Mom and Pops had decided not to take the old chair with them to Brentwood.

"Sit down, Bounce," said Pops. He moved his feet so Alice could sit on the footstool, as she usually did. It seemed strange to Alice to think that she wouldn't be sitting here ever again.

"Tell me, are you excited about moving to the new house?" Pops asked her.

"Ye . . . yes, I guess so," said Alice. "Are you?"

"Ye . . . yes, I guess so." He said it just the way Alice had. "To tell you the truth, Alice, I'm a little scared."

"Scared?" asked Alice. She couldn't imagine her father ever being scared about anything.

"Well, not really scared, of course," he replied. Then he waited. "It's just that I wonder if we are doing the right thing—making this big move with all this added expense."

"If it costs so much, why are we moving?" asked Alice.

"Because Mr. Weatherby wants us to go," said Pops. (Pops's boss again! Alice had never seen Mr. Weatherby, but she did not like him at all.)

"Why does Mr. Weatherby want us to move?" she asked her father.

"Well, Bounce, it's hard to explain, but I'll try," said Pops. "You see, Mr. Weatherby builds big, expensive

office buildings for rich people. My job is to sell them the idea of wanting a new building. But first, I have to find the rich people. Now, how many rich people can I find in White Birch Corners?"

"You found that rich man who stopped at Marie's Coffee Shop. That's right here in White Birch Corners," said Alice. "Mr. Weatherby built *his* office." Alice could remember how happy Pops had been when he came home that night, and how he and Mom had danced around the kitchen.

"That just happened once," said Pops. "I could sit in that coffee shop for years and never meet another rich man. In Brentwood, I'll be playing golf with rich men every week. I'll be getting my car fixed at the same garage with them, and having my hair cut in the same barber shop. Then maybe we'll be rich someday, too, Bounce."

"I wonder what it feels like to be rich," thought Alice, "to have all the clothes you want, and your own car, and rings and a watch to go with every dress. . . ."

They didn't say much more to each other. Pops went down to the cellar to be sure he hadn't left any tools in his workroom. Alice wandered upstairs and down trying to think how the rooms looked before. Mom would not be back until almost noon. They were to have lunch at a restaurant on the way to Brentwood.

At last Mom drove into the driveway in the white convertible. She had the top down and her lovely hair was

blowing in the wind. This time she was smiling. She honked the horn for Alice and Pops.

"Coming," shouted Pops through the open window; then he closed and locked it.

While Pops locked the front door, Alice ran ahead to get into the beautiful car. She didn't even look back at the old house. Already she was beginning to feel like a princess starting out on an adventure.

The car purred along quietly, and they were all very quiet too, even during lunch. In the early afternoon they arrived at their new home; and there, of all things, Alice found the movers putting her furniture into the princess bedroom.

"I hope you won't mind having this room, Alice," said Mom. "It's bound to be colder in the winter, with all these windows. But Pops and I need the one with the two closets."

"Mind! Oh, Mom, it's the one I wanted most," said Alice as she hugged her mother. "I thought you and Pops would want it because it's the biggest."

"It only looks bigger because of the windows," said Mom.

When Mom went downstairs to sign the papers when the movers were finished, Alice stepped up on the window seat to see if Mr. Cobb, the ogre, would shine the mirror in her eyes. But though she waited for some time, nothing happened.

In fact, she soon found out that it didn't happen very often, and never until late afternoon. She couldn't help wondering what the mysterious old Mr. Cobb was like. She had tried to get a look at him, but all she ever saw was a stocky little woman with a shopping bag, or the gardener working in a flower bed. But *nothing*—not the dancing light surely—could ever spoil her princess bedroom for her.

That's what she still thought a month later, when the house in Brentwood began to feel as if they had always lived in it. Alice's old bedroom furniture looked much nicer, now that it was painted and spread out in the larger room. Mom liked her new kitchen—especially the stove, which, she said, could do anything except choose what they would have to eat. Pops had a new chair with a footstool for Alice to sit on when she and Pops had one of their talks.

Pops didn't have time for talks just now. He and Mom were busy trying to meet the right people and being entertained by other members of the Weatherby Company living in nearby suburbs. Pops was invited to play golf and Mom went to meetings, and they were both invited to dinners at the Club and to go to the art museum and to the new plays at all the summer theaters and playhouses. Sometimes they took Alice. She liked the museum, but everything was rush, rush, rush; there was never enough time, even to look at the paintings.

She didn't understand the plays, and when they got home, her parents looked so tired and so discouraged that she didn't want to bother them with her questions.

But one Saturday morning was different. Things seemed more like they used to be at White Birch Corners. Mom and Alice were getting lunch, making tomato soup and sandwiches—shrimp salad ones for Mom and Pops, peanut butter and jelly for Alice. Pops would soon be in from the barber shop.

"There's the car in the driveway now. Turn the heat down under the soup, will you, dear?" Mom said to Alice.

Her father's step sounded heavy and slow on the stairs, and the door seemed to open heavily and slowly, too. No, things were not as they had been at White Birch Corners. There, Pops ran up the steps and before he had thrown open the door he began to tell Mom the news he'd collected at Vic's barber shop and which friends he had met on the way home. Now all you could hear in the kitchen was the click of the ladle against the saucepan, then the click of the soup spoons against their bowls.

After a long time, Mom asked cheerfully, "Did you meet anyone in the barber shop, dear?"

"I'm pretty sure Eben A. Cobb was sitting in the chair next to mine," said Pops. "I'm pretty sure I heard the barber call him Mr. Cobb." For such a big piece of news, Pops said it very matter-of-factly, with no excitement in his voice.

Mom was not so calm. "Eben A. Cobb! Why, darling, he's the man next door! How wonderful!" The dimples around her mouth were little lights.

"Wait till you hear the rest of it," said Pops sadly. "I tried to start a conversation by saying that I was looking

for a gardener. I thought Mr. Cobb would be interested in gardens; he has such a beautiful one. I even dreamed that maybe he'd wander over some Saturday to see how our place was coming on, if I could only let him know that I was the person who lived next door. Then, sometime later, we might get into some conversation about a new office building. Boy! Was that dream ever shattered! That man is a real ogre."

"I knew it," said Alice under her breath.

"What did you say?" asked Mom. Luckily, she did not wait for an answer. The lights on her face had all gone out. "Wasn't he interested in gardening?" she asked Pops.

"Gardening, maybe, but not gardeners," said Pops. "It's a good thing the barber slapped a hot towel over my face so he couldn't see what I looked like. Maybe I'll get another chance sometime. But it won't be on the subject of gardeners. Wow!"

"What did he have against gardeners?" asked Mom.

"Nothing really. But boy, did I have to listen to a tirade against strong young men who wanted to hire them," said Pops. "What was the matter with me that I couldn't handle a pick and shovel myself, he wanted to know. Was I afraid of getting my lily-white hands dirty? Getting into dirt and planting living things was a lot better for me than knocking a white pill around a golf course, and so forth and so on."

"Have some more soup," said Mom.

"No, thanks, I don't feel like eating," said Pops. "Helen, it's easy to see I haven't a chance in this community."

"Now, Ed, that's silly," said Mom. "We've been here only a few weeks."

"I know," said Pops, "but the more I see of Weatherby and his company, the less I feel like selling for him. Unless you believe in what you are selling, you don't feel much like trying to make a sale."

Nobody said anything for a long time. They just sat there looking down at their sandwiches and soup. Suddenly Mom looked up. "Edward Hunter, are you sure that man was Eben A. Cobb?" she asked.

Pops thought a minute. "N . . . no, come to think of it, I'm not sure. It might have been 'Conn' or 'Hob' or. . . ."

"Or there might be another Cobb in town," said Mom.

"I'll get the telephone book and we'll see," said Alice.

"Good thinking, Alice," said Mom. "See, there are three Cobbs in Brentwood and two of them live in this section of town. I don't think your man in the barber shop could possibly be Eben A. Cobb. I've seen a gardener working over there. Mr. Cobb would be the kind of man who would simply tell you the name of a place where you could hire a gardener. What you've said doesn't sound like our Mr. Cobb. Why, a man like him must play golf himself."

"Helen, I think you are right," said Pops, brightening. "Say, I think I'll have another sandwich and a glass of milk."

"May I be excused?" asked Alice.

"Yes, dear," said Mom.

Was the man in the barber shop really the Mr. Cobb next door, Alice wondered. "I don't think Mom was as sure as she tried to sound, either," she said to herself. "Way down inside, Mom believes it *was* the old man next door."

She went up to her room and threw herself on the bed. She was glad that Mom had been able to cheer Pops up again, but she knew that whether or not it was Mr. Cobb, nothing was really settled. Pops had not met him, or any other rich man for whom Mr. Weatherby could build an office.

4

Pops Has a Secret

"Nothing is right here in Brentwood," said Alice to herself. "It's Saturday afternoon. Back in White Birch Corners, we'd all be over at Marilyn's, or Terry's or Sue's, eating potato chips and talking about how Sue's brother teased us, or how the basketball game turned out. And tomorrow will be even worse. We won't even go to church."

Mom and Pops and Alice had usually gone to church and church school together in White Birch Corners. Every Saturday since they had been in the new house, Mom had said, "Now tomorrow morning, we really must get up early and find the church Mr. Hollingsworth told

us about." She even found a map of Brentwood and drew on it in red crayon to show the way to the church. But every Saturday night there was some party that Mom and Pops had to go to; and every Sunday morning they would sleep until it was too late to get to church.

"I didn't have the heart to waken your father," Mom would say. "He looks so tired and his face is so white and drawn. I don't know what's the matter with him. He used to be able to do three times what he does now without feeling tired."

Alice thought Mom's face was looking drawn and tired, too; maybe not so much tired as worried. Just then, the ball of light flashed around the room, this time without her being on the window seat.

Mr. Cobb again! That old man was the one who was causing all the trouble. If Pops could only get to see him once, he could easily persuade him to get a new office building.

She lay still on the bed, watching the light and thinking. By the time the light disappeared, she had made her plan. She got up, put on her oldest shoes, jeans, and sweat shirt, and went out to the garden.

"First, I have to get into Mr. Cobb's yard," Alice said to herself. "Once I get to know him, I'll find out which Mr. Cobb he is. If he turns out to be the man who was in the barber shop with Pops, I'll tell him a thing or two. I'll let him know that my Pops is *not* afraid to get his lily-

white hands dirty—that he isn't that kind of man at all. The nerve of that old ogre! I'll bet he never got *his* lily-white hands very dirty himself; and he couldn't build a house all by himself the way Pops did in White Birch Corners.

"I wonder if it *is* our house anymore?" thought Alice, as she went downstairs. "Pops said once he might have to sell it."

Alice walked the whole length of the high fence separating their property from Mr. Cobb's. She was looking for a gate or a break in the steel mesh large enough to let her through. But the fence, being new, was strong and impassable. It was hard enough to get through the hedge on this side of it.

But at last she did find a break in the hedge though not in the steel fence. A worn path ran through their own yard, under the fence, and right on across the Cobb garden. On the Cobb side, there were flat stones marking out a path.

"Sometime or other he was friendly with *somebody* who lived in this house," thought Alice. "Maybe it isn't as hopeless as it seems."

She toyed with the idea of walking straight up to the front door and ringing the bell, but the housekeeper would only say that Mr. Cobb was much too busy to see a young lady.

"She'd probably call me a child," thought Alice. No,

this has to look as if it just happened casually. She thought and thought, and finally decided that, undignified as it might be for a girl of her age, the only thing she could do was to dig a hole under the fence and scramble under it. She had a hard time finding the spade. It was at the very bottom of the pile of heavy garden implements and snow equipment that Pops had been promising to put away as soon as he felt more like it.

The shoveling, too, was not as easy as it looked when someone else did it. The ground was hard and gravelly behind the heavy bushes in the back corner of the yard. But she dared not dig the hole where it could be seen by either her family or the Cobb household.

After what seemed like hours, the hole was large enough for only a rabbit to crawl through with difficulty. "It will take days," thought Alice dejectedly. She covered her digging with some dry branches, put the spade back behind the lawn mower, tiptoed past the kitchen where her mother was papering shelves, and her father tinkering with a faucet. She did not want them to see how dirty she was and begin asking questions.

When she got upstairs, she called down to Mom, "I think I'll take my bath now. I'm all hot and sticky. Okay?"

"Of course it's okay," said Mom. "But I don't see how you could be *that* hot on a day like this."

First Alice went to her bedroom window to see if the hole could be seen. "It's all right, if you don't look too

closely," she thought. She could see the gardener in the Cobb yard, but he was over near the house and wouldn't have seen her digging.

"That mean old man even makes his gardener work on Saturdays," she said to herself. "I'll bet the poor man never gets a day off. I probably wouldn't be able to explain anything about Pops to old Mr. Cobb, anyway. Maybe I'd better give up the whole idea."

After she finished her bath, she lay on her bed thinking. She knew she should be trying to make another plan to help Pops, but her thoughts kept going back to White Birch Corners. Tomorrow would be Sunday. She missed her friends, her school, her church.

"Nothing seems right here in Brentwood," she said to herself. "Even God seems far away."

She was quiet during supper and went upstairs as soon as she had helped with the dishes, telling her parents that she was tired. "No, not sick, just tired," she assured them.

She read the daily reading from her book of devotions, put rollers in her hair to curl her pony tail, and got into bed. Just before she went to sleep, she remembered the lines of a poem, or was it a hymn?—one that Miss Archer often said, "Nearer is He than breathing; nearer than hands or feet." God was here in Brentwood, too. She must not think of him as far away.

When she got up on Sunday morning, there was still no sound from her parents' room. "We won't get to

church this Sunday, either," she said to herself as she tiptoed downstairs to get a bowl of cereal. Her mother and father had been out to a party again last night. And there was the usual argument before her parents left. She had to try once more to convince her mother that a girl her age did not need a baby sitter. Mom had insisted on leaving the telephone number of the people who were having the party.

"It certainly was late when they got home," thought Alice. "I hardly had time to turn the TV off after the late show, and scramble into bed when I heard the car in the driveway. I didn't get my last snack, either. That bowl of cereal will taste good."

She was tiptoeing through the lower hall when she heard a groan in the kitchen. Why, it was Pops! He was all bent over, clutching his stomach, and his face was contorted with pain. He tried to straighten up and smile when he saw Alice, but winced again with the terrible pain.

"What's the matter, Pops?" whispered Alice, sensing that Mom should not be awakened—at least not yet.

"I don't know, Bounce," said Pops between groans. "I've had it before. . . . It's apt to come . . . when I'm hungry. . . . I thought I'd come down . . . and fix some warm milk."

"But Pops, you need a doctor," whispered Alice. "Shall I call Dr. Higgins?"

"No, no, don't do that, for heaven's sake," her father replied.

"You look as if you need him, Pops," she urged.

"White Birch Corners is miles away." He groaned again. "Dr. Higgins wouldn't come this far. . . . I'll look for a doctor here in Brentwood on Monday. He'll probably tell me I have an ulcer from worrying and all I need is a long vacation." Pops snorted. "Vacation! I need *work,* good hard work." He started to get up, his hands gripping the table.

"Sit still, Pops. I'll warm the milk," said Alice. Then, "How about some milk toast like Mom makes?"

"That might be good," he replied.

The two sat at the table, Alice eating her cereal and her father dipping slowly into the bowl of milk toast. Neither of them spoke until Pops had finished the last spoonful.

"Bounce," he began, then stopped and tried again. "Bounce, in all the years I've known your mother, I've never kept any secret from her. But right now, I think it would be best if Mom didn't know about this . . . this trouble I'm having. After I've seen a doctor, we can decide whether to bother her with it or not. It may be nothing but indigestion. There's no need to worry her over nothing. Let's just keep our little Sunday morning breakfast a secret for a few days, shall we?"

Alice hesitated. She knew in her heart that her mother should know what was happening to Pops. But maybe

he was right. Maybe it would turn out to be nothing at all. The color had come back into his face and the wrinkles of pain had gone. "Okay, Pops," she said.

After a few moments, they heard the old mahogany bed squeak and they knew Mom was awake.

"Let's surprise her," said Alice. "Let's give her her breakfast in bed like we do on her birthday."

"Great idea," said Pops.

He was almost himself again by the time the tray was ready. Mom was too surprised and happy to sense that anything was wrong with him. Alice left the two of them propped up in bed on pillows, reading the Sunday paper. She had to get out to the back yard.

Pops was sick and he was worried, too. If he *did* have an ulcer, and if he *did* need work, she could at least try to do something about it. "I'll dig that hole and get into Mr. Cobb's yard today, if it's the last thing I ever do," said Alice.

5

Fill It Up!

What with all the interruptions from her family, and with trying to keep the digging a secret, Alice didn't finish the hole until nearly supper time. She was just putting the shovel back in the cellar when her mother called, "Alice, what on earth are you doing down there? Get yourself washed for supper, dear."

That night she surprised her parents by saying, "You two can have my Sunday night hour on TV. I think I'll go to bed early." For a few moments she had a difficult time persuading her mother she did not have a fever; that she was just tired and hot and wanted to take a bath before she went to bed. She knew she would only raise

more questions if she said she wanted to be alone to think.

"She is acting so strange lately. She went to bed early last night, too," she heard Mom say to Pops as she got to the head of the stairs.

It was still not dark when she got into bed. With the radio music low, and both the large and small pillow under her head, she was ready to plan what she would do when she got into the Cobb yard the next day.

"Lucky for me the housekeeper goes over to the vegetable market early. If only the gardener will be working in the tool shed, I'll be all set. I'll go up to the back door and keep knocking until Mr. Cobb opens the door. Then I'll say, 'I'm your next door neighbor and I have come to call.' He certainly couldn't be impolite and not invite me in."

She was ready to settle down for sleep when a thought struck her. What if the plan didn't work? What if the housekeeper didn't go to market?

"She'll have to go to market on Monday. There won't be a thing in the house after the weekend," she reassured herself. She thrust from her mind the thought that Mr. Cobb probably didn't eat very much, and if he had had a big Sunday dinner there would be a *lot* left over.

And the gardener? "What if I meet him?" she asked herself. She thought for awhile and decided she would be brave and say to him, "Your garden is so beautiful, I

thought I'd take a walk in it. I've come to see Mr. Cobb." She liked the look of that gardener. He might even help her.

Then again, he might not. Her mind sprang from one difficulty to another. If she *did* get to see Mr. Cobb, what would she say to him to bring the subject around to her father? How would she begin? A hot feeling of panic blew over her at the thought of meeting that old man face to face.

"Dear God," she prayed. "I'm desperate. You know how sick Pops is, and how worried he is. You know how he counts on getting Mr. Cobb to let Mr. Weatherby build him a new office. Help me to do something that will make things better for my father. Please, God."

She read the page for the day from *Daily Light,* the little book Miss Archer had given Mom when she was Alice's age. Then she turned off the light and tried to go to sleep. She lay first on one side and then the other; took away her pillows, put them back again; pulled up her summer blanket, then took it off again.

She must have fallen asleep at last, for at least twice in the night, she had to wake herself up from terrible nightmares. Huge dogs were chasing her through the Cobb yard. By the time morning came, she wished she had never thought of the idea in the first place. But she had only to look at her father's face across the breakfast table to renew her determination.

It was no easy job getting under the fence. The hole was not deep enough after all. And there was hardly room to lie down between the hedge and the fence. The more she struggled, the crosser she became that the old man next door had put up the fence in the first place. Did he think the Hunters were thieves? She finally managed to lie flat on her back and inch along under the steel mesh, stopping at each wriggle to unfasten the prongs of wire caught in her T-shirt.

She was scrambling to her feet on the Cobb side, when she heard a deep voice above her. "So you are the animal who's been digging under our fence. I wondered what kind of beast had the sense to cover its diggings with branches."

Alice looked up into the face of a tall, white-haired man with red cheeks and a boyish grin. The gardener! She was so frightened she could not speak. All the words she had planned to say had vanished from her mind completely. This was the man who might help her. But the grin had faded, and his next words dropped like cold stones. "Now look here, Bear. I'm not going to have my garden dug up by you or any of your kind, do you hear?"

She stood looking down at his knees, crusted with mud from his recent planting. He touched her ever so lightly with the stick he held.

"Back you go, Bear. Scramble back where you belong, and get that hole filled up by tomorrow morning. We put

that fence up for a purpose—to keep people OUT!" He waited until she had crawled back into her yard, then turned his back and walked away.

Alice was so disappointed at her failure that she started to cry. She couldn't go into the house; she would have to explain her tears. Without thinking where she was going, she wandered back to the orchard.

"I'm no good at all," she said to herself, as she lay flat on the low stone wall. "I didn't even speak to him. If only I had told him about Pops, he might have helped me to see Mr. Cobb. Poor Pops!" Then she sighed a deep sigh. "I wish I had a brother; he'd know what to do."

The sun was in her eyes, so Alice turned on her side. It felt warm on her back and was dancing in sparkles over her bedroom windows when she looked up.

"I don't see what you've got to be so happy about, Mr. Sun," she said. The weight of her sadness fell heavy upon her—not only her own; she felt as if she were being pressed into the stones by all the sadness in the world. The sun shining on the windows brought words to her mind. "Good-bye, house. Good-bye, my bedroom. Good-bye forever."

Ginny! Alice sat up suddenly. She had not kept her promise to Ginny. She jumped off the wall and ran into the house.

Mom was using the electric beater and Alice had to shout to be heard above it.

"Do you know where Ginny lives?" she asked.

"Who's Ginny?" Mom called back.

"Ginny Appleby. Don't you remember the Negro family who were here the day we first saw this house?" said Alice.

"Oh, yes, the Applebys. I'd forgotten their name. No, I don't know where they live," said Mom. "I wonder if Mrs. Appleby ever found her dream house." She turned off the beater and stirred the fruit into the dessert she was making. Her thoughts seemed far away.

"Mom, this is important," said Alice. "I've got to get in touch with Ginny."

"What's so important about it?" asked her mother. She looked up at Alice for the first time. "Why, Alice, I've never seen you so dirty. What *have* you been doing?"

"Digging in the garden," said Alice quickly. "Mom, I promised Ginny I'd invite her over if we got the house. Ginny wanted the princess bedroom, even more than I did, and. . . ."

"The what?" her mother interrupted.

"My bedroom," she replied. Alice told her mother about that Sunday afternoon in the orchard when Ginny looked up at the bedroom windows and said good-bye to the house; and about how Alice had promised that if the Hunters got the house she would invite Ginny over. "And I've never asked her once," finished Alice.

Mom dried her hands and got the telephone book.

"Appleby, Appleby," she went down the list. "Are you sure that was the name? Nobody by that name lives in Brentwood."

"They didn't live in Brentwood, remember?" said Alice. "I can't think of the name of the place. It was where Dr. Appleby's father lived. Think hard, Mom, please."

"This means a lot to you, doesn't it, dear? Let's both try to think. I wish your father were here. He has a good memory for names and places."

Mom put the dish of dessert in the refrigerator and took out a coke and a sandwich for Alice. "I know," she said. "We'll call Miss Trent at the real estate office." She picked up the kitchen phone. Alice thought they would never get through the "How are you's." Then Miss Trent wanted to know why they wanted to call the Applebys. And after all that, she did not know where they were. "They have probably moved into a new house by now," she told Mom. "They were terribly anxious to find one. They took their name from our list when they lost the house in Brentwood."

Seeing how eager Alice was to get in touch with Ginny, Mom even phoned Pops at the office during his lunch hour. But Pops couldn't remember the place where the Applebys lived, either. Alice ached all over with disappointment. "What will Ginny think of me!" she said to Mom.

"Now, Alice, hurry and clean up for lunch—and forget about the whole thing," said her mother.

Forget! How could you forget all about it when you had promised? Mothers certainly had funny ideas sometimes. "People are so busy they don't stop to think how you feel," thought Alice. "That gardener, for instance." He hadn't even waited to hear what she had to say. He never gave her a chance to tell him why she had dug the hole. "Fill it up," was all he said.

Fill it up! She had better get out there and do it. Suppose he should phone Mom to tell her what her daughter had done!

"Now, where are you going?" Mom asked, as Alice jumped from her chair and hurried out the back door.

"I'll be back in a few minutes," she called, as the screen door slammed behind her.

6

Alice Meets the Gardener

The spade was where she had left it when she had finished enlarging the hole that morning. Alice lifted it, filled it with dirt, and then stopped.

"No! I just can't do all this work for nothing," she said to herself. "I've got to try one more time."

She dropped the spadeful of dirt back on the pile. "Dear Father God," she prayed, "this time let it work out right."

She wriggled under the fence, saying over and over what she would tell the gardener if she met him. "I've come to see Mr. Cobb, and your garden is so pretty, I thought I'd take a walk through it."

"But please, God, don't let him be there," she prayed.

This time Alice was safe in the Cobb yard. She walked along a narrow path with her head down so as not to lose the way. "Now all I have to do is to get up my courage so I can face Mr. Cobb," she said to herself. "I'll just say to him. . . . "

Suddenly she felt as if all the trees in the garden had fallen on her head. Right in the middle of the path stood the gardener. She looked up to see him scowling down at her. She tried to speak, but her words came out all mixed up. "I . . . I . . . I just 'wought' I'd take a 'thalk' through your garden," she said.

"Well, just 'thalk' yourself right back under that fence, young lady, and no more of this nonsense, do you hear?" said the gardener. "I thought I made that very clear this morning."

Alice did not know what to do. This was her very last chance to see Mr. Cobb. She looked into the red face of this man who was spoiling everything. She could not keep the tears back.

"Now, now, Bear, don't *do* that. I hate crying women," he said, "and crying Bears are even worse. What do you want here, anyway?"

"Oh, Mr. Gardener, I've got to see Mr. Cobb," she replied.

"Mr. Gardener? My name isn't Gardener," said the man.

"Aren't you Mr. Cobb's gardener?" asked Alice.

"Mr. Cobb's *gardener*?" Suddenly he smiled. "Yes, yes, I think I can truthfully say that I am Mr. Cobb's gardener." He seemed to have a hard time to keep from laughing.

"Could you help me to see Mr. Cobb? I've just *got* to see Mr. Cobb," said Alice.

"Well, now, I'm not sure that I can. He is a very busy man. I'd have to know what you wanted to see him about first," said the gardener. "Let's sit down on this stone seat and you tell me all about it."

He led Alice off the path a step or two, and there behind a flowering shrub was a little circle of grass with a stone bench at one side of it.

"Sit down, Miss Bear," he said. "Now why do you want to see Mr. Cobb?"

"Well, one day Pops was in a barber shop . . ." she began.

"Pops?" he asked.

"My father," said Alice. "Pops *thinks* Mr. Cobb was in the next chair. He just *has* to meet Mr. Cobb somehow; so, to start the conversation, he asked if Mr. Cobb knew where he could get a gardener. And that old ogre lit into my father. . . . "

"That old what?" asked the gardener.

"Well, I've never seen him, but he acts like an old ogre," said Alice. "He said that my father was lazy and

afraid to get his lily-white hands dirty and why didn't he do his own gardening instead of playing golf. Do you think the man at the barber's was really Mr. Cobb?"

"It rather sounds like Mr. Cobb," said the gardener.

"Well, now you know why I have to see him. Pops isn't that way at all. He built our house in White Birch

Corners with his own hands as a present for his bride—that's Mom," explained Alice. "And he doesn't even like to play golf. He likes to make things of wood."

"Then why does he play?" asked the man.

"He has to," said Alice.

"Why?" This man asked a lot of questions.

"Because that's how he can meet rich men," said Alice.

"Does he like rich men?" The questioning continued.

"How can he like rich old meanies like Mr. Cobb?" asked Alice. "It's just because Mr. Weatherby, that's Pops's boss, says he has to meet rich men so Pops can get them to have Mr. Weatherby build them new offices."

"And your father would like to meet this . . . this, what did you call him? . . . rich old meanie? . . . so that he could get him to build a new office building?" asked the gardener. "I happen to know that Mr. Cobb does not *need* a new office building and he does not *want* a new office building."

"Are you sure?" asked Alice. "Pops says that old office of his is a wreck."

"I am *very* sure," said the gardener. "And what's more, it is not a wreck. It is. . . ."

"Have you ever been in it?" asked Alice.

"Of course, I've been in it," he replied. "I'm in it almost every day of my life."

"I just thought, you being the gardener, maybe you'd never. . . ."

"Yes, yes, to be sure, the gardener. Well, you see I . . . Mr. Cobb likes flowers, and I often take them to his office," said the man. "So I am quite sure that it would do no good at all for your father to see him about a new office building."

The gardener rose. Alice could tell by the look in his eyes that there was nothing for her to do but leave. She lifted her stricken face and said in a voice that could hardly be heard, "Good-bye." She choked on her tears and started slowly down the path toward the fence. Then she heard the brisk voice behind her.

"Okay, Bear, you win," said the gardener with an impatient sigh. Alice stopped in her tracks and turned around.

"I can never resist little girls and their tears," the man went on. "They wind me around their little fingers. I suppose I'll have to see your . . . I'll have to see that your father meets the mysterious Mr. Cobb."

Alice ran up the path and almost threw herself into the gardener's arms. "Oh, Mr. Gardener, you are the nicest man in the whole world—next to Pops."

"Your father doesn't know how fortunate he is to have Miss Bear for a daughter," said the gardener, smiling again. So they sat down on the stone bench at once to plan the meeting.

"Let's see. Today is Monday," Mr. Cobb's gardener continued. "Meet me here on Thursday afternoon about

this time. I'll see if I can arrange to have Mr. Cobb see your father on the following Monday night."

Alice could hardly believe it was true. She had no doubt in her mind that all their troubles would be over if only Mr. Cobb and Pops had a chance to talk together. "Do you really think Mr. Cobb will see my father?" she asked.

"Of course he will," replied the gardener. "I mean . . . I think there is every reason to believe that the meeting can be arranged. Mr. Cobb is not such a rich old meanie as you think. And I wouldn't call him an ogre. He is a bit ornery at times, a trifle hard to get along with. You see, he loses his temper. But he does have his good moments. Now, run along, Bear. I'm a busy man. I'll see you on Thursday afternoon."

Alice's throat felt very tight, but she had to get the words out, "Thank you. Thank you very much."

"Oh, I do hope the gardener will find Mr. Cobb in a good mood," Alice said to herself as she wriggled under the fence and ran into the house. "I don't see how I can ever wait until Thursday." Mom was getting dinner. "I'll be down to set the table as soon as I've washed up," said Alice, as she skipped through the kitchen.

She took off her jeans and sweat shirt and went into the bathroom to wash. Then she chose a cool shift from her clothes closet. The first thing she saw after she had wriggled it over her head was the little ball of light flitting

happily around the room, touching the glass tray of tiny bottles on her dressing table.

"Mr. Cobb may not be a meanie," said Alice to herself, "but he certainly does mysterious things. I wonder if the gardener knows he plays with that mirror of his. Mr. Cobb seems to be in a good mood tonight, anyway."

As she went down to the kitchen to help her mother, she said a little prayer. "Thank you, dear heavenly Father, for making things turn out right so far. Please let Mr. Cobb say he will see Pops."

"We are going to eat on the back porch," said Mom. "You can set the table out there."

"Great," said Alice, as she tied on the apron that matched her mother's. "I love to eat on the porch."

"So does your father," said Mom, "and so do I."

They were quiet for a moment. Then Alice said, "Mom, do you think we could possibly go to that new church next Sunday?"

"Why, Alice, I didn't realize you had missed church," her mother replied. "Yes, we will really get to that church next Sunday morning, if we have to walk there on our hands and knees."

"Who is going to walk where on their hands and knees?" asked Pops, who had come in from the front door.

"We are—to church next Sunday," said Mom.

"I don't think that will be necessary," said Pops. "I

could do with some church myself. And I could do with some extra sleep on Saturday night. I may tell the boys we won't be at the Club that night."

"Oh, Ed, do you think you should? Your chances to meet the men informally . . . ?" Mom asked.

"If I don't get more sleep, I'm not going to be able to meet anybody, day or night," said Pops.

He did look tired. "I wish I could tell him that something nice was going to happen to him," said Alice to herself.

7

A Date with a Bear

Andy and his grandfather were having dinner the next Wednesday evening, when Mr. Cobb said, "I hate to go off and leave you alone in this big house, Andy."

"Oh, I'll be all right; don't worry about me," said Andy. He did not want to tell his grandfather that the nights were no lonelier than the long days were.

"I've asked Mrs. Meggs to sleep in the guest room until I get back," said Mr. Cobb. "It will be only a couple of nights. I hope to get back by Saturday afternoon."

"You don't need to have her stay, Grandfather," said Andy. "I'm old enough to stay by myself."

"I know you are," he replied, "but if you were fifty,

I'd still feel better about leaving you if I knew Mrs. Meggs were here in case something happened."

Maybe they could play Scrabble together. Mrs. Meggs loved to play Scrabble. "It would be something to do, at least," Andy thought to himself.

"I wish I didn't have to go on this business trip," said Mr. Cobb. "This is the sort of thing your father does so well, Andy. If he were here, I'd send him. But there isn't a young man in our office today who could handle the situation. They won't take responsibility; they're . . . Oh, great heavens!"

Mr. Cobb was red in the face; he had stopped in the middle of a sentence and was staring into space, his mouth open, and his fork halfway to his mouth.

"What's the matter, Grandfather?" asked Andy.

Mr. Cobb finished his bite of meat, then said, "I had forgotten something very important. Tomorrow is Thursday and I have a date with a bear."

"A what?" asked Andy, not believing his ears. "Did you say a *bear?*"

"Don't interrupt me; I've got to think," said Mr. Cobb.

Andy suddenly thought of the conversation he had overheard between his mother and father before he had left home. His mother had mentioned that Grandfather did not like young people any more. There was some trouble about the couple that lived next door. Mother seemed to think that because Grandfather did not like

these people, nor the young men around town, he was getting old and queer.

Up to now, Grandfather had seemed normal enough. Andy had written reassuring letters to his mother. Now Andy was not so sure. Grandfather certainly sounded as if he were a little crazy. A date with a bear! And what started him off was getting mad about the young men in his office. Maybe he was normal on every subject but this. Maybe he only went crazy when he thought about young businessmen.

"Are you feeling all right, Grandfather?" asked Andy.

"Of course, I'm feeling all right. I never felt better in my life," said Mr. Cobb. "Now, young man, I am going to ask you to do your first job for the firm of Cobb, McKinney, and Cobb."

"Whew! That sounds pretty big," said Andy. Better humor him, Andy thought.

"Now listen carefully," said Grandfather. "Tomorrow afternoon, at about four o'clock, you are to go down to the stone seat in the circle and wait until Miss Bear arrives."

"Miss *who*?" asked Andy.

"Bear," said Grandfather.

"Is that her name?" asked Andy.

"Stop interrupting, Andy. She's just a bear—digs under fences. One of the first rules of the company is that you must listen carefully until you have received all your

instructions. Then you may ask all the questions you wish. Now when Bear comes, say to her, 'The gardener says to tell you that Father Bear may expect a phone call from Mr. Cobb on Saturday night.' By the way, you'd better find out what Father Bear calls himself. Get his name and telephone number and put it on my desk on the third floor. You may also say that the gardener regrets that he is called away on business . . . no, that won't do. Say that the rich old meanie has sent him away to buy bulbs, so he can't deliver the message himself."

"Mr. Cobb, you will never catch your plane, if you don't hurry." It was Mrs. Meggs. She had bustled in with Grandfather's light topcoat and his brief case.

Grandfather glanced at his watch. "I should say I *will* have to hurry. Good-bye, Andy. Take good care of Mrs. Meggs, and good luck on your first job for the company."

He was gone before Andy had a chance to ask a question. What could he have meant anyway? That was the craziest speech he had ever heard . . . bears, gardeners, bulbs, Thursday afternoon at four o'clock at the stone seat in the grass circle. Grandfather *was* really queer. He had better write to his folks tonight and tell them about this. And Grandfather going off to be gone for two days. . . . Was he safe? Andy was so worried he could hardly play Scrabble, but Mrs. Meggs had a wonderful evening, winning every game.

Andy was so tired after the Scrabble games that he put

off writing the letter to his parents until morning. The next day, he wondered if he might have been mistaken about Grandfather's strange conversation. Maybe he hadn't heard correctly. He finally decided to wait until after four o'clock that afternoon. Maybe what happened in the garden would clear things up.

He felt rather silly going down to the grass circle to meet "a bear." He felt even sillier the longer he sat on the stone bench waiting.

Having "bear" on his mind, he was listening for heavy, lumbering footsteps. He almost fell off the stone bench with surprise when he looked up and saw a girl standing in front of him. Even at first glance, he could see that she wasn't bad, for a girl. She didn't have her hair all "ratted up," and she wasn't opening big, dark eyes at him. In fact, she looked halfway between ready-to-cry, and down-right-mad.

"He promised. The gardener promised he would be here at four o'clock," she said, almost to herself. "Who are you?"

The gardener! The words brought back to Andy's mind his first assignment for the firm of Cobb, McKinney, and Cobb.

"I'm Andy," he replied, rising to his feet. "Are you Miss Bear?"

"Mr. Cobb's gardener calls me Bear, because I dug under the fence to get in here, though I don't think bears

really dig. I'm Alice Hunter, from next door." She was now on the verge of tears.

"That grandfather of mine!" thought Andy. Either he was completely nuts, or up to one of his jokes. He started to tell this girl that Mr. Cobb did not have a gardener, but thought he had better do exactly as Grandfather had told him. As if he were repeating memory work at school, he said, "The gardener says to tell you that Father Bear may expect a phone call from Mr. Cobb on Saturday night. I am to get the full name and telephone number of Father Bear now. I've brought a pad and pen to write it down. I am also to say that the gardener . . . no, that the rich old meanie, whoever he is, has sent the gardener, whoever he is, to buy bulbs."

The whole thing sounded sillier and sillier as Andy went along. He was getting a little peeved at Grandfather for having put him in such an embarrassing position before a girl he had never seen before—and quite a pretty girl at that. She'd think he was either crazy or stupid or both!

But she was looking at him as if the whole thing made sense. Her face actually glowed with happiness! "Oh, thank you, thank you so much," she said. "When I saw Pops bent over in his chair again last night, I thought I couldn't stand it if the gardener told me Mr. Cobb wouldn't see him."

"I suppose Pops is your father—Father Bear?" asked

Andy, thankful to see a little light in all the confusion. "I'd better get his name and telephone number."

"His name is Mr. Edward Hunter, and the phone is BR 6-3680," said Alice, looking down at the pad to be sure he made no mistakes.

Now that the business entrusted to him had been taken care of, Andy felt that he should get at the question of Grandfather's sanity. "There's a lot I don't understand," he said. "Do you mind telling me who the gardener is?"

"He's that tall man who works in this garden," said Alice.

"Does he have white hair and red cheeks, and does he stand very straight?" asked Andy.

"Yes, he does," said Alice.

"That's Grandfather," said Andy.

"Then you are the gardener's grandson," said Alice. "Your grandfather is wonderful. He's got it all fixed for my father to see Mr. Cobb."

"But he *is* Mr. Cobb," said Andy. "He's Eben Andrews Cobb. My father is Eben Andrews Cobb, the second, and I am Eben Andrews Cobb, the third. With a name like that, I sure am glad they call me Andy."

"Then what about the gardener?" asked Alice, still puzzled.

"There is no gardener. Grandfather does all the gardening himself, always has," said Andy.

Alice sank down on the stone bench, covering her face

with both hands and groaning. "What have I done?" she moaned. "I've ruined all Pops's chances. I called Mr. Cobb an ogre and a rich old meanie to his face. Oh, why didn't I keep my big mouth shut?"

"You called Grandfather a rich old meanie?" asked Andy. "Why he's not like that at all. Whatever made you say that to him?"

"Oh, it's so awful," said Alice.

"What *are* you talking about?" asked Andy, sitting down on the bench beside her.

Alice began with the barber shop and told Andy the whole story. She even told him about the lights from the mirror flashing in her room. When she had finished, she said, "Well, at least I feel much better." For Andy had reassured her that his Grandfather would probably have been highly amused at what she had said to him. "If Mr. Cobb is that kind of man, everything will be all right for Pops," she said, then sighed. "It must be getting late. Mom will need me to help with dinner. I'll have to go."

Andy felt better, too. At least, he felt a little better. He knew that all the talk about bears and gardeners was perfectly sane—another of Grandfather's good deeds. But now there was the mystery of the flashing balls of light in this girl's room. And he shuddered to think of what Grandfather might do to Alice's father if he were a young man getting started in business. Grandfather did not like young businessmen, Mother had said.

Suddenly Andy realized that he and Alice had made no plans to see each other again. If things got rough for her with Grandfather and her father, she might need his help. He tore down the path to the fence, and was just in time to catch her before she got too near to the house.

"Hey, Alice, Alice," he called softly. She heard him and came back. "We'd better fix up a signal if you need me. And I want to find out about Grandfather and those lights. Will you pull your window shade down and up twice if the balls of light shine in your room again?"

"Sure," said Alice. "But they really don't bother me. Oh, I never thought! It isn't the old ogre; it's the gardener, I mean Mr. Cobb himself! Yes, I'll pull the left shade up and down twice if they come again. It only happens late in the afternoon, so be watching."

"I will," said Andy. "Good-bye . . . uh, . . . Alice."

"Good-bye, Andy," said Alice.

8

The Secret Drawer

On Friday afternoon, Andy went through the house trying to find the clearest view of the left window in Alice's room. The only place from which he could see it at all was from his grandfather's study. This worked very well for today, with Grandfather away, but how was Andy ever going to watch Alice's window when late afternoon was just the time when Grandfather worked in his study?

And tomorrow was Saturday and Grandfather would probably be home all day. Andy watched for a long time, but nothing happened. He was really hoping that Alice's shade would go up and down twice—a signal that

she saw the lights flashing in her room. Then Andy would know that his grandfather had nothing to do with it.

Somehow, Andy could not picture his beloved grandfather flashing a mirror into a room in the house next door. He loved to play jokes, but this was not Grandfather's kind of joke. It was all very puzzling. Mrs. Meggs beat him at Scrabble again that night.

Mr. Cobb did not get home on the noon plane as he had expected. He phoned Mrs. Meggs to give Andy his dinner and to put a plate in the oven for him. She was not to worry if he did not get home until eight or nine in the evening. When she told Andy, he shouted, "Hooray," but Mrs. Meggs looked so puzzled, he added quickly, "Hooray, only eight more hours and he'll be home."

To kill some time until four o'clock, he went up to the third floor storage room to rummage through the old trunks and his great-grandfather Cobb's desk. Today was certainly his lucky day. He discovered two secret compartments he had never noticed before.

"Pretty simple, too," he said to himself. "How stupid can I get?"

He had pulled out the two small drawers just above the writing table, as he had done many times. This time, at the back of one of the drawers, he found a small brass circle, the size of a penny, but much thinner. This stopped the drawer from opening any farther. He took the thinnest blade of his knife and pushed the circle to

the left. It slid down behind to a half circle, leaving the drawer free to open the whole way, and revealing the secret compartment at the back.

There was nothing in the first drawer, but in the second he found an old magnifying glass. It looked exactly like the one Grandfather used when he read the fine print in his law books, except that the brass on this one was a different color and the leather around the handle was much more worn.

Andy crossed the large attic to go to his grandfather's study. He wanted to compare the two glasses.

"Wow! It must be almost four o'clock," he thought suddenly. He glanced at his watch. It was five minutes past. He ran across the hall and into the study and almost fell into the arms of his grandfather, who had just turned away from his desk. He had Mr. Hunter's telephone number in his hand. Both of them looked as if they were seeing ghosts. Grandfather was the first to speak.

"Where did you get that glass?" he asked, staring at it as if it were something which had suddenly dropped from heaven.

"Grandfather! We didn't expect you home until eight!" Andy said at the same time.

"We finished sooner than we had expected, and I was able to catch the two o'clock plane," said Mr. Cobb. "But you haven't answered my question. *Where* did you get that glass?"

Andy explained the secret drawers in the old desk. "It's just like your glass, isn't it, Grandfather?" he asked.

"I believe it is, Andy, but I'm not sure. We looked all over for this glass after your great-grandfather died. He always used it when he read his law books, and I felt so sentimental about it that I wanted to use it when I read mine. I had one made as nearly like it as I could remember," said Mr. Cobb.

Grandfather took the two glasses in his hand and he and Andy went over to the window to examine them more closely. The clock on the shelf chimed a quarter past the hour. Alice! The window shades! Andy looked out toward the Hunter house, and there was the shade at Alice's left window going down and up, down and up, frantically.

Andy didn't lose a minute running downstairs and out into the garden, leaving his grandfather lost in thought at the study window. Would Alice have sense enough to meet him at the hole under the fence, behind the shrubs, where no one would see them? You'd think so, but you never could tell about girls.

But Alice was running across the back garden when he arrived—headed straight for the spot where he was waiting.

"There were two balls of light this time, two of them," Alice said, breathlessly. "Both were exactly the same size."

"Both the same size?" asked Andy, eagerly. "If they were, then there's no mystery about it at all."

"What do you mean?" asked Alice.

He told her about his great-grandfather's desk and the two magnifying glasses. He explained how Mr. Cobb, in the late afternoon, would often take his law books to the chair by the window. There he would read the fine print with his own magnifying glass. This afternoon, there had been two magnifying glasses. They flashed in the sun. That was all there was to it.

They were both silent for some time. Andy was greatly relieved that his grandfather had not been playing some silly trick on the people next door—that he was as sane as he had ever been.

Alice was thinking her thoughts, and the more she thought, the worse she felt. She had imagined the whole fairy tale, and it had turned out to be simply Mr. Cobb reading his law books. What must Andy think of her? It didn't help any to hear him say, "So, you called my grandfather an old ogre and a rich old meanie for nothing."

"I'm sorry," said Alice. "I'm sorry I was such a stupid idiot." She looked as if she were ready to cry.

"Aw, that's all right," said Andy. "I was only kidding. It must have been scary, seeing those lights in your room —and almost every day, too."

"No, it wasn't scary," said Alice. "It was . . . well, sort

of comforting. Please don't ever tell your grandfather. Now he will never phone Pops."

"Sure he will," said Andy. "He had the pad with the phone number in his hand when I came into his study with the magnifying glass. But will your father be home?"

"Oh, I never thought of that," said Alice. "It's Saturday night. They usually go out but Pops said maybe they wouldn't this time. Do you think your grandfather will phone early?"

"I don't know," Andy replied.

The two discussed all the possibilities of what might happen, and how each emergency might be met. "If things don't work out, we'd better arrange a signal," said Andy. "Then we can meet and make new plans." They decided on lowering and raising the window shades, either in Alice's room or in Grandfather's study, depending on where the emergency arose. They were still planning when Alice's mother called her to help with the evening meal.

"Why aren't you eating tonight?" Pops asked at the dinner table.

Alice thought to herself, "If you knew what I know, you wouldn't be eating either." Aloud she said, "I guess I'm not very hungry."

"Are you feeling all right, dear?" her mother asked.

"I guess so," said Alice. She was, but this might be a good way to pretend to be sick, if she had to. That was

one of the plans to keep her parents at home. She did not dare to ask if they were going out. "I couldn't bear it if they said yes," she thought.

As it turned out, she did not have to pretend. The phone rang, Pops answered it and came back younger looking and more excited than Alice had seen him since they moved from White Birch Corners.

"Helen, you will never guess who just phoned that well-known businessman, your husband," he said to Mom.

"The next thing you'll be telling me is that it was Eben A. Cobb, of Cobb, McKinney, and Cobb," said Mom. "Who was it?"

"It *was* Eben A. Cobb, of Cobb, McKinney, and Cobb," said Pops.

"Ed Hunter! *It wasn't!*" said Mom.

"Helen Hunter, *it was!*" said Pops. "I have a date with him at his home next door at eight o'clock on Monday night."

At first Mom just looked stunned. Then all her dimples came out as she began to smile. "So let's celebrate. Let's celebrate by *not* going out," said Pops, taking her hand.

"Thank you, dear heavenly Father; thanks a whole lot," breathed Alice.

"And let's celebrate by going to church tomorrow," said Mom.

"We were going to do that anyway," said Pops. "Say . . . I wonder how Cobb happened to call me."

Driving home from church the next day, Alice sat alone in the back seat, as usual. Pops was very quiet. Mom did all the talking.

"I like that church very much, don't you, Ed?" She did not wait for an answer. "To tell the truth, I dreaded going. You know, I've never been to a big church in all my life. I thought I'd never like a church as much as the one at White Birch Corners, and of course, I don't even now, but I could get used to this one. Why the people were all so friendly, weren't they, Alice? And the minister. . . . "

It was a good thing that Mom had gone right on talking. The church was so big you felt right out in the middle of everything. It wasn't like the comfortable side pews where they always sat in First Church in White Birch Corners. There, if you got tired of looking at Mr. Hollingsworth while he was preaching, you could look out at the trees beyond the open windows. Here you felt as if everyone were looking at you; you felt all shut up inside, and it was dark. And as far as the people being friendly went, they were okay to Mom and Pops, but they didn't know *she* existed.

But of course this was just their first Sunday. She missed Marilyn, and Terry, and Sue, and Miss Archer,

and Mrs. Hollingsworth—and dear old Mrs. Grantby, even if she did pat Alice on the head every time she saw her.

"Ed, you're not saying a thing," said Mom. "Didn't you like it?"

"Yes, I liked it," said Pops. "I've been thinking about something the minister said. You know, Helen, I've been feeling guilty about moving to Brentwood, taking you out of the home we loved. I've never been sure it was the right thing to do."

"Why, Ed, I didn't know you felt that way," said Mom. "Why haven't you said anything about it before?"

"I tried to, Helen," he replied, "but you seemed to be so happy about the move. Let's put it this way—I couldn't tell whether you were really happy, or acting as if you were happy."

Alice liked to listen to their conversations when they forgot she was around. It happened often.

"What was it the minister said?" asked Mom.

"It was what he said about not making any decisions, even little ones, without first finding out if it was God's will, if it fitted into God's plan for our lives. I knew very well that it was not wise to move—that we really didn't have enough money to do it, that I shouldn't have borrowed on my life insurance—but I wanted to please the boss. I never thought about pleasing God."

Alice couldn't remember ever hearing Pops talk about

God like this before. It made God seem . . . well, more *alive*.

"Ed, it's time you knew something I should have told you long ago," said Mom.

Alice wriggled forward to the edge of the seat to catch every word. "You say you did what you did to please your boss. Now I am going to tell you the truth. I acted the way I did because of your boss. Mr. Weatherby came to see me one day while you were at the office. He told me he was going to ask you to move to a place like Brentwood. He wanted all his men living in successful, rich, suburban towns, where they could meet the right people, and help the business."

"Helen, you should have told me this right away." Pops almost stopped in the middle of traffic.

"Mr. Weatherby didn't want me to," she replied. "He said some of the wives were objecting. He said things like, 'more good men were ruined by their wives than by anything else.' He said he knew he could depend upon me not to stand in the way of the man I loved."

"Why that old . . . Helen, I could wring his neck," said Pops. "Then you really didn't want to move? Tell me the truth."

"I thought my heart would break," said Mom. They were both very quiet. Pops had only one hand on the wheel, so they were holding hands again. Then Mom said, brightly, "But that's all over now. I *love* my new home,

and I like this church, and Mr. Cobb has phoned, and everything will be all right."

"Do you think so, Helen? Do you really think so?" asked Pops as they drove into the garage.

"It had better be," said Alice to herself, "after all the trouble I've been through."

9

A Dismal Evening

As they were getting out of the car, the phone rang and Mom hurried ahead to answer it.

"Miss Archer is driving over with Marilyn and Terry and Sue," said Mom, as Alice and Pops came into the living room. "Isn't that wonderful, Alice? They expect to get here by two o'clock." At once Mom began to make plans. "We'll put up the folding table in the back yard, and. . . ."

It would be great to see the gang again, but Alice dreaded it, too, in a way. She hadn't seen the girls all summer. Had they changed in their friendship toward her? Mom interrupted her thoughts.

"Isn't it just like Miss Archer to do this for you, Alice? I'm so glad they are coming. I had begun to worry about you. You are so quiet and not at all like your old bouncy self. You've missed the girls, I know. You don't know a soul here in Brentwood, but you'll meet new friends when you start school."

Mom, of course, did not know about Andy. "Where are the paper napkins, Mom?" asked Alice.

Mom was never happier than when she was getting ready for guests. "Top drawer on the left. Ed, look and see if there are soft drinks in the 'frig. I do hope Miss Archer won't wear that blue tweed suit of hers."

"What's the matter with that suit? It looks nice with her blue eyes," said Pops. "I'll get some more cokes from the cellar."

"She's had it ever since she went to Scotland that summer, and I certainly wouldn't want Mr. Cobb to think our friends were shabby," said Mom, "especially not right now. Bring up some ginger ale, too. Miss Archer likes ginger ale."

"Do you think Mr. Cobb has nothing else to do but watch to see who comes to call on us?" Pops shouted from the cellar stairs.

It turned out to be the worst afternoon Alice could remember. The girls were glad to see her at first, but they were soon talking among themselves about people and happenings she knew nothing about. She got tired of ask-

ing, "Who's he?" and being told, "Oh, you wouldn't know him. He's staying with his aunt for the summer," or "They've moved into the Johnson place." She did not dare to ask if anyone had moved into their house. The last she had heard was that Pops had not been able to sell it; he wanted too much money for it.

Then it started to rain, and they had to go inside. There wasn't a thing to do but show the girls through the whole house. (Miss Archer had been taken through while the girls were still outside. She *had* worn the blue suit, with a new pink blouse. Her eyes *did* look bluer, and she was even prettier than usual.)

Alice was petrified for fear the little ball of light would be dancing around her room, but fortunately nothing happened. She showed the girls her new clothes, just for something to do. She distinctly heard Marilyn whisper to Sue, "She's so stuck up these days!"

When they came downstairs, Miss Archer and Pops were having a serious talk.

"But, Edward," Miss Archer was saying. "I don't see how you can continue to work for a man who uses poor building materials. Why, the roofs might cave in; people's lives might be in danger."

The girls were talking but Alice had to know what Miss Archer and her father were talking about.

"I don't *know* that the building materials are bad," said Pops. "I've just *heard* that they were. The plans I've

been given to show people when I sell to them look pretty good."

"Poppycock!" said Miss Archer. "Edward Hunter, you know better than to tell me that. Either the company builds with good materials or it doesn't." Mom and Pops both looked worried.

"Alice, you haven't heard a word I've said," said Terry.

"I'm sorry, Terry. What did you say?" asked Alice.

"I said that you don't seem like *you* anymore. You act different, too. Even your voice sounds different. And you've got this big house and all these new clothes. I wish you were back in White Birch Corners."

"I feel just the same inside," said Alice. But did she? She'd have to think about it. There was so much on her mind. And now this talk with Miss Archer. What if Pops decided not to try to sell Mr. Weatherby's plan to Mr. Cobb? After all her trouble, what would Mr. Cobb think? And what would Andy think?

Alice thought the time would never come for the girls to go home. But at last Miss Archer rose to say good-bye. "Thanks a lot for coming," Alice said to the girls. "And thank you, Miss Archer, for bringing them over."

"We haven't had much time together, have we, Alice?" said Miss Archer. "But I don't think your father will forget this visit very soon. You won't, will you Edward?"

"No, Miss Archer," said Pops. "I promise you I'll give some thought to what you've said."

When the good-byes were over, Alice went up to her room to do some more thinking. It had been a very strange Sunday afternoon.

Next door, Andy was thinking he had better check the window of the house next door. He and his grandfather had had lunch in the city, to give Mrs. Meggs the day off. They had spent a good share of the afternoon in the Indian museum. Now they were back home and Mr. Cobb had settled down with the Sunday paper.

So Andy slipped upstairs to watch the windows next door. No shades moving. There probably was no reason why they should be moving. Everything was all set. Grandfather and Mr. Hunter would have their meeting and that would be that. There was no reason why he should ever see Alice Hunter again. Somehow, the idea was not a very satisfactory one.

He thought everything over for a while. Well . . . he could listen in on the conversation between the two men and report back to Alice. Then he could see her once more, at least. "That's the least I can do for the poor girl," he said to himself. Then another idea struck him. "Maybe she'd like to listen herself. Grandfather is sure to take her father into the library for their talk. That's at the back of the house. I could sneak her in early and we could sit at the top of the back stairs and watch them, the way I used to when I was a kid."

It took several pulls of the shade before Alice re-

sponded, and it was after five o'clock before they met at the fence. It certainly took a lot of urging to persuade Alice that it was all right for her to sneak into the Cobb house and listen in on the conversation between Mr. Cobb and her father. But at last she agreed and it was all arranged.

"I'll meet you here at the fence at a quarter to eight," said Andy.

All day Monday, Alice had an uncomfortable feeling. She knew she should not have said yes to Andy. She was sure that Mr. Cobb would not want her to be listening, and that Pops would be very disappointed in her if he knew. She tried to think how she could tell Andy to forget the whole thing. Almost without knowing why, she was at the fence at quarter to eight. She had had to lie to Mom, too. Well, maybe it wasn't really a lie. She *was* taking a walk—as far as the Cobb house, anyway.

In a few minutes she and Andy were sitting at the top of the back stairs which led down into the library. It was pitch dark there, but Alice was still afraid that she could be seen. When Mr. Cobb and Pops came into the room, she trembled with fear and her heart pounded. Andy, sitting on the next-to-the-top step, whispered, "Take it easy, and stop worrying. Everything's okay." He made the okay sign with his hand.

The two men were talking as they came through the door. "Let's get to the point, Hunter," Mr. Cobb was

saying. "Your boss wants you to get me to build a new office. Is that correct?"

"Yes, Sir. I've brought some plans along. Perhaps you would like to see. . . ." Pops stopped in the middle of his sentence. "*You* phoned *me,* Mr. Cobb. How did you know about the office building?"

"Ah, errh. . . . Let's just say a little bear told me," said Mr. Cobb.

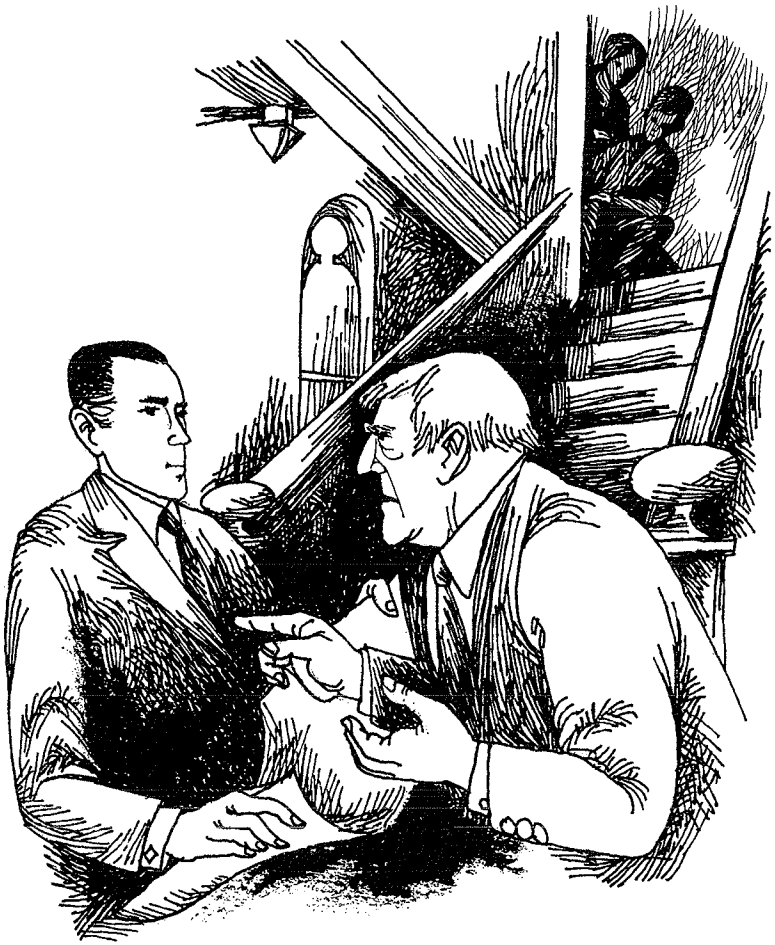
The palms of Alice's hands were wet with perspiration, she was so nervous. But Pops had misunderstood. He thought Mr. Cobb had said, "A little bird told me."

"The birds surely do get around, don't they?" said Pops.

Mr. Cobb let it go at that. "They do, indeed," he replied. "Now let's take a look at these plans of yours."

Then the agony for Alice really began. Mr. Cobb did not like Pops's plans. He did not like them at all. Pops's face got red, and he tried his best to sell Mr. Cobb the idea, but the more he tried, the more furious Mr. Cobb became.

Finally Mr. Cobb pulled out a huge roll of papers. "Now let me show *you* a set of plans, Hunter," he said. "Here is our present building. It has everything you suggest and a lot more. Look at this . . . and this . . . and this. What we have now is all we need for the time being. There is room for us to expand, and due to the wise planning of my father ("My great-grandfather," whis-



pered Andy), this building will outlast ten of those little scrap heaps you are talking about. I've seen Weatherby's buildings."

Pops said nothing. He was looking over the plans carefully, and he was smiling as if he liked what he saw. How he could manage a smile at a time like this was a mystery to Alice.

Mr. Cobb went on, "What you young fellows have to learn is that things are not necessarily bad because they are old, or good because they are new. The question is, are they well-planned and well-built with good materials?"

"You sound like my father, Sir," said Pops. "He taught me to build well." (Alice did not bother to whisper, "My grandfather.") Then Pops told Mr. Cobb about the house he had built in White Birch Corners for his bride. Maybe this would persuade Mr. Cobb. Alice hoped so with all her heart.

But Mr. Cobb seemed more irritated than ever. "Then, what are you doing in Brentwood?" he demanded angrily. "You moved into my son's house next door and so I felt I had a perfect right to find out who you were, and. . . ."

Alice looked at Andy, puzzled. "Mr. Cobb's son?" She whispered the question.

"Yes, we used to live next door before Father got sick," Andy whispered back. "I used to have your room—the one with the back windows and the fireplace. Grand-

father felt awful when we had to go to Arizona so Father could breathe better."

"I didn't know you had lived in our house," said Alice.

"Shhhhhh," said Andy.

"You mean you have investigated my private affairs?" Pops was asking Mr. Cobb. Alice had never seen her father so angry.

"Yes, I did, and when I found out about you, I decided not to have a thing to do with you. You are just like the rest of these newcomers in Brentwood—in debt over your head. It will take you the rest of your life to pay what you owe. Under ordinary circumstances, I wouldn't spend time talking to a man whose business affairs are in such a bad state. It is only because of Bear that I phoned you at all."

This time Pops heard very clearly. "Bear, Sir?"

Alice knew she would faint and fall down those stairs right into the library, if Mr. Cobb gave her away.

"Never mind about Bear," said Mr. Cobb. "Now that you're here, let's talk about you."

She could not take another minute of this. "Andy, I've got to go home," she whispered.

"Oh, come on, sit still. Let's hear the rest of it," he replied.

Alice stood up. "Please, Andy," she pleaded. "Show me the way out of here."

Now, what was the matter, Andy wondered. Just when

things really got interesting girls always wanted to do something else. He led her through the upstairs hall, out the front door, and down the street to the Hunter house.

As they said good night, Andy said, "I like that blue dress."

It looked very bedraggled and dirty, having been under the fence once that evening. It was a good thing Mom was at the phone explaining why she and Pops hadn't gone to the party Saturday night. Maybe she could wash the dress herself, before Mom saw it. She was glad Andy liked the color. It was the only crack of sunlight in a terribly dismal evening.

"I shouldn't have gone," she said to herself. "I knew I shouldn't, but I went just the same. My poor father! I've spoiled his whole life! Why did I think I was so smart that I could make everything turn out right by messing into it?"

She got into bed and cried herself to sleep.

10

Mr. Cobb Takes Charge

Alice was awakened next morning by the sun shining in her eyes. She could hear her mother phoning downstairs.

It must be late. She usually woke up early and had breakfast with Pops while they let Mom sleep. He had not yet seen a doctor, though Alice brought up the subject every time she dared. The pain in his stomach seemed to be worse in the morning, until he had eaten the milk toast Alice always fixed for him. This morning she could not hear his voice at all. Could he have gone to the office?

She went downstairs in her pajamas. Mom was already

dressed, still sitting in the chair with her hand on the phone, though she had hung up the receiver. She had evidently been crying hard and for a long time.

"What's the matter, Mom?" asked Alice.

"Nothing. . . . Oh, Alice, I don't know what's wrong," her mother replied. "Your father didn't come home last night."

"Didn't come home? Then where is he?" asked Alice.

"I don't know," said Mom.

"Why didn't you wake me up?" asked Alice.

"I didn't want to worry you. And I didn't know what to say," Mom replied. "I'm sure there is some good reason for all this, but it isn't at all like Ed not to phone. I don't understand it at all."

Alice was now fully awake, remembering last night. Her heart was beating in her throat until it almost choked her. She felt wooden all over. She dropped down on the footstool of Pops's big chair and never took her eyes off her mother's face. In a voice that sounded miles away, she told her mother everything that had happened—about the hole under the fence, about the "gardener," who turned out to be Mr. Cobb, about Andy, and about last night. When the last word was spoken, she knew she was going to die.

But all Mom said was, "So you were the reason Mr. Cobb phoned Ed." Her voice sounded far away, too. If it were not for that one remark, Alice would not have

known that her mother had heard what she said. "You'd better hurry and get dressed now, dear," said her mother, looking straight ahead as if she saw nothing.

When Alice came back downstairs, her mother said, "I don't know what to do. I've thought of everything—even calling the police, but what would Ed say if I did, especially if he walked in in a few minutes with a perfectly explainable reason for not coming home? It would make him look like a fool. It might ruin all his chances here in Brentwood."

Alice could not think of an answer. She could hear the clock ticking as they sat looking at each other, too numb to think further.

The ring of the telephone was as loud as a fire alarm. Hope lighted both their faces, then died down as Mom said, "Yes, Mr. Cobb. You say he went out in a hurry . . . forgot one of his papers? Mr. Cobb, did Mr. Hunter say where he was going after he left you? . . . Well, you see, ah . . . Ed did not come home last night, and I am afraid something terrible has happened. What did you say? The car? No, he hasn't taken the car; I looked earlier this morning, and it is still in the garage. . . . Well, yes, I *am* worried, terribly worried. No, I'm not alone; our daughter, Alice, is with me. . . . Oh, Mr. Cobb, if you would, I'd be so grateful. I really don't know what to do."

"He's coming right over," said Mom. "He wanted to

know why we hadn't called him earlier; what was a neighbor for?"

"Then he isn't cross at Pops and us," said Alice.

From the moment Mr. Cobb opened the front door, he took charge of everything. He called all the hospitals; he called the police. "The longer you delay, the harder it will be for them," he told Mom. "If this turns out to be nothing, we can all laugh it off." Then Mr. Cobb called the radio station and asked them to broadcast a description of Pops. He called Pops's office and told them he would not be in; and called his own office and asked them to cancel all his appointments for the morning.

"Now, all we have to do is to wait until we hear something. It could be soon, and I could use a cup of coffee," said Mr. Cobb.

"I thought *she* needed one, Bear," he whispered to Alice as Mom went into the kitchen. Soon Mom came in with a big pot of coffee, a plate of cookies, and a dish of cornflakes for Alice. She ate them without knowing what they tasted like.

"Forgive my asking this question," said Mr. Cobb. "I assume that your husband has never done this before?"

"Never," said Mom. "The strangest part of it is that he hasn't phoned. Ed phones if he's going to be a few minutes late from the office, or even if he's downtown and decides to get a haircut."

"Good man," said Mr. Cobb. Then Mom asked, "Mr.

Cobb, was Ed terribly discouraged when he left you last night? He counted so much on building your office. You don't think he was so disappointed that he. . . ."

"No, I don't think anything of the kind," said Mr. Cobb, without waiting to find out what Mom meant. "Mr. Hunter surprised me. To tell you the truth, Mrs. Hunter, I did not like what I knew about your husband's finances—in debt over his ears, and so forth. When we began our conversation, I was pretty hard on him. But I must say, your husband can take talk straight from the shoulder and I admire him for it. We had a long conversation about his future.

"When he got up to leave, it was almost eleven. I'm trying to recall exactly what he said. Let's see, we were standing at the front door. As we shook hands, I said, 'Good night, Neighbor.' He looked me in the eye and said, 'Thank you, Sir. I did not get what I came here to get, but I have a feeling I am leaving with something more valuable than a contract for an office building. I have a lot of thinking to do.' "

"That was a strange thing for Ed to say," said Mom. Alice thought so, too.

It was a long, long morning. Mom sat very still by the phone; Mr. Cobb paced the floor. Alice had to keep busy. She washed the dishes, made the beds and did a small washing, listening for the ring of the telephone until her neck and shoulders ached. She had to keep busy.

Soon after eleven, the phone started ringing, and kept up every few minutes after that—people who knew Pops, men from his office, women who had met Mom, the police (with more questions) , the barber, the grocer, and people they had never heard of. Some were just curious; most asked what they could do to help. But no one had any news of Pops.

"Perhaps we shouldn't have broadcast the description," said Mr. Cobb. "I hate to have you bothered like this."

At a little after one o'clock, the doorbell rang. Mom was at the phone; Mr. Cobb had left for his office, saying he would be back in a couple of hours. Alice opened the door, and there stood Ginny and her father!

"I was driving Ginny to the throat specialist to see about her tonsils," said Dr. Appleby. "We turned on the radio for the one o'clock news, and heard about Mr. Hunter. We weren't too far from here, so I thought I'd better come right over. What can I do to help?"

Ginny said to Alice, "Don't worry. Daddy is good at helping. He always knows just what to do."

Alice wanted to say, "So does my father . . . usually."

Mom was telling Dr. Appleby about Mr. Cobb and what he had done so far.

"If you don't mind my asking, was Mr. Hunter in any trouble?" asked Dr. Appleby.

"I don't think he was," said Mom, hesitatingly. "He did tell Mr. Cobb he hadn't got what he wanted, but he

said something about having found something valuable and that he would have to do a lot of thinking. I don't know what he meant. You see. . . ."

Dr. Appleby interrupted. "You say he had a lot of thinking to do? A thought just flashed through my mind. Do you remember that first day we came here? He asked me what I would do if we didn't get this house, and I told him I'd take a long walk in the woods. Then he said, 'Oh, do you do that, too, when you're in trouble? That's exactly what *I* do.' Now, where would Mr. Hunter go if he wanted to walk and think things out?"

"If we were in White Birch Corners, I'd know just where he would go," said Mom. "He would take the trail along the crest of the hill. That was where he always went when he wanted to figure out something he was building. But I don't think he ever took a walk around here."

"He played golf," said Alice. "That's a kind of walking."

"I'll try the golf club first," said Dr. Appleby. "Ginny, you call your mother and tell her where we are. Ask her to call Dr. Field and change your appointment to sometime next week. Then ask her if she can borrow your grandpa's car and come and get you."

"Dr. Appleby, this is too much to ask of a busy man like you. The police have already scoured the golf course, but I didn't think to tell them about walking. Maybe

just one more try. . . ." said Mom. "I would drive Ginny home or to the doctor's, but. . . ."

"No, no. You must stay here," said Dr. Appleby. "You may get a phone call any minute. My wife will be glad to come over. Now, you are not to worry. I'll say my prayers, and try my best."

Ginny made the telephone call to her mother. Mom got out glasses and opened some ginger ale for them. Then she came back and sat down in the chair by the telephone.

"Now, Alice, you don't have to worry anymore," said Ginny. "Everything is going to be all right."

"How do you know?" asked Alice.

"I just have a *feeling* it will be," said Ginny.

It was comforting to have Ginny here, trying to cheer her up. There was something she had to tell her, too. "Ginny, I've felt awful about breaking my promise to you."

"What promise?" asked Ginny.

"You know, about inviting you here a lot if we got the house," said Alice.

"Oh, that," said Ginny. "Don't worry about that. I didn't think you would."

"Why?" asked Alice.

"Oh, I don't know. I just didn't expect you to," said Ginny.

"I tried. We phoned Miss Trent and everything. We

couldn't remember the name of the town where you lived," said Alice.

"You did! You telephoned Miss Trent to get our telephone number?" Ginny seemed really surprised and happy that Alice had tried to find her.

When Mrs. Appleby arrived, she seemed just as comforting to Mom as Ginny was to Alice. She was in no hurry to leave. "I'll bet you two haven't had a meal all day," she said. Mom seemed glad to have her make some soup and toast and a salad for them.

"Did you ever find your dream house?" Mom asked her.

"No, we never did. We are still at Smithtown with my husband's parents," she replied. "What about you and this house?"

Just then the phone rang. It was Dr. Appleby. "Then he is safe?" they heard Mom say. "Oh, thank God, thank God!" Dr. Appleby talked for a long time, and when Mom hung up, she collapsed, sobbing, into Mrs. Appleby's waiting arms.

Alice wanted so much to hear what had happened to Pops. She had to know. She finally put her hand on her mother's shoulder and asked, "What happened, Mom? What happened to Pops? Is he all right?"

Her mother stopped crying and turned around at once. "Oh, Alice, I'm so sorry. I've been thinking only of myself. But it is such a relief to know that Ed is safe." She

wiped her eyes; her sobs subsided as she talked. "Pops is all right, or going to be. He is in the hospital. Dr. Appleby says he has had a lot of bleeding from his stomach. You and I are to go to the hospital now to see him."

It was some time before Alice could piece together the whole story of what happened to her father after he left Mr. Cobb's house. Pops said that it was like having a long talk with his own father. Mr. Cobb had told him things he already knew; it was just that he had not been willing to face them—he *was* foolishly in debt, he knew he should not be working for a company that put up poor buildings, he should have the courage now to do what he thought was right.

"But I had to think about you and Alice," he said to Mom, "and how I could ever ask you to stick with me while I got out of this mess."

He had walked for hours—first through the streets of Brentwood and then down the road to the golf course and out along the edge of the ravine.

"The more I thought, the worse it got," Pops explained. "I tried to get into the clubhouse to phone you, but the doors were locked. Anyway, I hoped you were asleep. It was dark by then, the moon had gone down. I hadn't eaten anything, and suddenly I got that terrible pain in my stomach. I must have lost my footing, because the next thing I knew, I woke up at the foot of the ravine. I tried to move, but kept fainting. I could

hear men calling my name from up above, but I couldn't call back. I felt as if I had lain there for a hundred years when I heard Dr. Appleby scrambling down the bank. There's a man for you!"

"Don't try to talk any more, Ed," said Mom. "We have plenty of time to make plans. Just lie here until that stomach ulcer begins to heal. The doctor says that if all goes well, you can come home in a few weeks."

"Kiss me good-bye then, Bounce, and come tomorrow, both of you," said Pops. He was sleeping peacefully before they left the room.

"Remind me to call Mr. Cobb as soon as we get home," said Mom. "He will have come while we were at the hospital. And I do want to thank him for all he has done."

Wonderful old Mr. Cobb! How could she ever have called him an ogre. And Andy! Why, Alice hadn't thought about him all day.

11

Back to White Birch Corners

"Alice, someone wants you on the phone," Mom called upstairs that Wednesday afternoon.

"Who is it?" asked Alice.

Mom covered the mouthpiece and whispered, "I don't know; sounds like a boy."

It was Andy. So he hadn't forgotten all about her. "That's real tough luck about your father," he said.

"Thanks, Andy. He's going to be all right. He can come home in a couple of weeks," she told him.

"Don't you ever look out of your window anymore?" he asked. "I had that shade going up and down all yesterday afternoon."

"We were at the hospital," Alice replied. "What did you want?"

"Nothing special," said Andy. "I just wanted you to know I was sorry about all your tough luck. Guess what? Grandfather is having a gate put in the fence where you dug the hole. He said your mother would need some help while your father was in the hospital. He's got me signed up to mow your lawn."

During the next two weeks, Andy became a friend of the family. (Pops heard a lot about what he was doing to help and wrote Andy a note, thanking him.) Mr. Cobb came over every day to see that things were going smoothly, to inquire about Pops, and to offer to run any errands. Mrs. Meggs baked a soft custard for Pops, and gave mother the recipe when she learned he liked it.

Alice was happier than she had ever been in her life. She and Andy had a lot to talk about. Sometimes they would sit on the wall by the orchard, and sometimes they would sit in the Cobb yard in what Alice called the magic circle. Andy described his home in Arizona and told her how much he missed Star, his horse. Alice told him about White Birch Corners.

The days flew by. Pops had to stay in the hospital a week longer than they had planned. It was late August before he got home.

All the worried look was gone from his face as he sat in his big chair, feet up on the stool beside Alice. It was

a cool evening and they were enjoying the fire. Andy had brought over some wood and had laid it in the fireplace ready to light after supper.

"That's another thing I'm going to do to the house in White Birch Corners," said Pops. "Someday I'm going to put in a fireplace."

"I think it's time we told Alice," said Mom.

Alice looked from one to the other. They both seemed happier—maybe she meant more contented—than they had been in a long time—more like they used to be before they moved to Brentwood.

"We are moving back to our old home in White Birch Corners," said Mom. "Tell her all about it, Ed—just as you told it to me."

Pops shifted his feet on the stool. "I've had a lot of time to think, Bounce. When I lay at the foot of that ravine, I thought I might never see you and Mom again. If anything had happened to me, I would have left you and your mother with nothing but debts. I had borrowed money on my life insurance and couldn't sell the house in White Birch Corners, as I had hoped. I made a great mistake when we moved to Brentwood, Bounce."

"But I would never have had the princess bedroom; or never have known Andy if we hadn't," she thought.

"I'd been trying to find a way out, even before I had this accident," said Pops. "I didn't like this work I was doing when I found out that it was not honest work.

After the sermon that first Sunday, I knew it wasn't God's will, either. But I kept trying to forget what my conscience was telling me."

"Pops realized how far away from God we were getting when I was ashamed of Miss Archer's blue suit that Sunday," said Mom.

"I don't see how," said Alice. It was gradually beginning to dawn on her that she would have to leave all that had given her so much joy here in Brentwood.

"Don't you see, dear? I was thinking more about how Miss Archer might look to our friends, than about how much she, as a wonderful person, had meant to us over the years," said Mom.

"As a matter of fact, it was Miss Archer who made me face my mistakes and take responsibility for getting back on the right track," said Pops. "We talked that day here at the house, and again when she came to see me in the hospital. I owe a lot to Miss Archer, and to Mr. Cobb, too."

"But I don't see why we have to move back to White Birch Corners. Why can't we stay here and do what God wants us to do," said Alice.

"This isn't going to be easy for you, Bounce. It isn't going to be easy for any of us. Try to understand, won't you? I know you will, and I know you'll help to make it easier for us," said Pops. Then he explained that the larger house would have to be sold to pay their bills. They would not get the amount they had paid, and they would lose money on the deal.

"Just now I don't even have a job," said Pops, "not a real one, anyway. I had to resign from Mr. Weatherby's firm, because it isn't right for me to ask people to buy the poor buildings his firm puts up."

"What are you going to do, then?" asked Alice.

"We've sold the upper corner lot to Dr. Appleby," said Pops. "I owed him that anyway for taking this house away from him, and White Birch Corners needs a good doctor. The whole county needs him. They will have a hard time at first, and they know it, but the Applebys are delighted, especially Ginny."

"Especially Ginny's mother," said Mom. "She is going to have her dream house."

"And your Pops is going to help build it. It was Ken Appleby's idea, and it was the best news I'd had in a long time," said Pops. "I don't know what I can find to do after that, but imagine getting paid for doing something you'd rather do more than anything else in the world!"

"God has given us a way out of our difficulties, Alice, but it is going to be hard work all the way," said Mom. "I may have to take a part-time job, and you'll have more to do around the house than you ever had before. There won't be any new clothes for any of us for a long, long time."

"But that house in White Birch Corners is so dirty," said Alice. "You could see the streak where the couch had been up against the wall, and all the places where the pictures hung, and. . . ."

"Bounce, we are mighty lucky people to have a house to go back to," said Pops. "We'll get it all cleaned up

and put some fresh paint on the walls before we move back. I've got some paint left from this house."

"When will we be going?" asked Alice.

"As soon as we can arrange it," said Pops. "I hope, before your school starts in September."

At least she wouldn't have to start in a new school—a thing she had been dreading to do. But it might be even worse to go back into the class with Marilyn and Terry and Sue. They didn't seem the same anymore. Then she suddenly remembered that Ginny would be in their class. And that Terry *had* said, "I wish you were back in White Birch Corners."

"I know just how you feel," said Andy next day. He was sitting on the ground in the magic circle facing Alice, who was on the stone bench. "I remember the day I had to pack all my stuff in that room. I sure hated to say goodbye to those windows and to the orchard. And you've got to move back into that old, cramped-up house? Poor Bear."

"It isn't all that bad," said Alice. "And I won't have to start in a new school."

"School! Why do you have to bring that up?" asked Andy. "Aren't things bad enough without mentioning school? You know, I never thought I'd hate to leave here this year, when the time came, but I sure do hate to go now. Just like you, I guess."

"Yes, only you can come back," said Alice.

"Poor Bear," said Andy again. "I'm not much on letter writing, but if I do get around to writing you a letter, will you answer it?"

"Of course I will," said Alice. "My mother has brought me up to answer all my letters."

Andy pelted her with the handful of grass he had been plucking.

The day came when Alice, too, had to pack the things that were in the princess bedroom. She would never forget this room which had been hers, as it had been Andy's. In a way, it had been Ginny's dream room, too. Alice smiled to herself as she remembered the first time she had ever seen it—the ball of light dancing from wall to mirror, the "old ogre" who lived next door. How different everything had turned out to be!

Again the wave of dread washed over her at the thoughts of going back to White Birch Corners—Mom working, she having to help a lot with the housework, no new clothes. . . . She was taking her dresses out of the large closet. Where would she put them in their small house? She loved the navy blue suit with the large white collar she had worn to church and to the museum. No more museum, either. Oh, drat! She stamped a foot. Why did God have to be so mean?

"I shouldn't have thought that," she said to herself.

"God, I'm sorry." She had taken her blue dress from the rod, the one she had had on that awful night when she and Andy sat on the stairs, the one she had washed and hung on a hanger over the tub to dry during that long, long, day when they were all waiting to hear what had happened to Pops.

"Everything will be all right," Ginny had said. And everything *was* all right—all the important things anyway. Pops was alive and they had a home to go to, and Mom and Pops were glad because they felt that they were doing what God wanted them to do. "God, I'm really sorry I said what I did about your being mean," she prayed. "I'll do all I can for Mom and Pops, but you'll have to help me."

What if he didn't? They would be poor a long time—Mom had said so. Alice did not like the idea of being poor. She thought about the poor people she knew—about Agnes Brown, and Jimmy Grimes. They looked as if they were half starved. "Suppose we don't even have enough to eat?" she thought to herself, as she hung her dresses in the plastic bags Mom had saved from the cleaners.

Now she sat down on the floor to go through the bottom drawer. On top of the winter sweaters lay the book her church school class had given her when she left White Birch Corners. She had forgotten all about it. Opening it, she saw for the first time that each of the girls

had written her name on the first page. At the bottom of the list was a Bible verse in Miss Archer's handwriting:

> "My God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus."
> —Philippians 4:19.

"Mom, Pops, listen to this," said Alice, running downstairs with the book in her hand.

ABOUT THE FORMAT

The text of this book was set in Linotype Baskerville, 12 point leaded 3 points. This face is an exact copy of John Baskerville's celebrated type, first produced by him in England about 1757.

Typographic design by Margery W. Smith

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Myra Scovel received an R.N. degree from Syracuse University School of Nursing and later studied poetry and radio and TV scriptwriting at Columbia University, New York. With her husband, Dr. Frederick G. Scovel, she served as a medical missionary in China and India from 1930 to 1958.

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Myra Scovel is presently Special Assignments Writer in the Office for Communications, The United Presbyterian Commission on Ecumenical Mission and Relations. She is also currently serving as president of the New York City Chapter, National League of American Pen Women.

For those teachers who wish to use this book in a study program with children, a **Junior Teacher's Guide to Accompany "The Mysterious Mr. Cobb"** by Marjorie Spice is available. Paper 75¢

$1.75

The Mysterious Mr. Cobb

by Myra Scovel

Alice thought it would be exciting to move from their little house to a grand big one... but it wasn't at all! There were tears in Mom's eyes and Pops was so quiet. Alice was confused. Why did they have to move?

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